

Albus Dumbledore groaned as he stood up, a sound not usually heard from the ever-cheerful Headmaster. He had just spent the past thirty minutes interviewing a Ms. Sibyll Trelawney for the Divination post. It was bad enough that he had to find a new Defense professor every year, but finding someone gifted with the sight was becoming increasingly difficult. Sometimes he wished he could just follow his Deputy Headmistress's advice and drop the subject, but the Board of Governors wouldn't hear of it.

He had agreed to meet with Ms. Trelawney in the Hogshead, a rather seedy pub in Hogsmead. She had shown off her obviously lacking skills in divination as she read his palm. According to her, the aging Headmaster had only a matter of weeks to live before he choked on a lemon drop. Personally, he was glad she was such an obvious fraud.

Dumbledore had politely informed her he would owl her if she got the job, and was gathering his cloak to leave when it happened. Just as he turned his back, a dry, whispery voice started to speak...

***"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... born to those who have thrice defied him... born as the seventh month dies..."***

In the dark recesses of the pub, a thin figure sat hunched over a sizzling Fire Whiskey. Handfuls of lank, greasy hair slipped from beneath the hood pulled over their face, and they sipped with an air of despondence. Hearing only the start of the prophetic rambling from the Witch, their entire demeanor changed. They inhaled in shock and sat up, accidentally knocking over the mug. The alcohol seeped across the table, staining the wooden surface, and the old bartender scowled at him, heading over with a filthy rag. The figure stood abruptly. Pulling their cloak tighter about them, they strode out of the Hogshead and disappeared...

***"...the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal... and either must die at the hand of the other... for neither can live while the other survives... the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... born as the seventh month dies..."***

Sibyll Trelawney gasped like a dying fish one more time, her magnified eyes rolling behind the thick spectacles. Suddenly, she

slumped forward, dead silent. Twitching, she snorted, and peered up as though just waking.

"Oh, my," she yawned, ruining the misty quality of her voice, "I'm afraid I must have dozed off, Headmaster. What were we speaking of?"

Albus Dumbledore took only a moment to collect himself, and then he sat back down. Regaining his composure, Dumbledore felt the familiar twinkle in his blue eyes grow with a new intensity, and he smiled at the woman. "Yes, I was just about to congratulate you, Ms. Trelawney. You're hired."

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It was the 31st of October, better known as Halloween, and a day when anything was deemed possible. On that particular Halloween, events would take place that bordered on the impossible, even by magical standards. In the quiet and homely village that was Godric's Hollow, a small cottage stood slightly isolated from the others. Of course, to most, it would seem as though no house existed. Only a select few knew of its location, and more importantly, of the Wizarding family within.

The surrounding neighborhood was nearly deserted as lights went off, curtains were drawn, and doors were locked for the night. At nearly twelve p.m., the majority of the small village was sound asleep. Not even a gust of wind disturbed the silence that night. Overall, it was what some would call an almost unnatural quiet.

Inside the cottage was another story. Just beyond the sitting room, a man with dark untidy hair lay in a crumpled heap, the eyes behind his horn-rimmed glasses wide and glassy. A slim piece of wood still rested in his palm, and not even death could erase the defiant twist of his lips. Further up the stairs, a single door was left open, leading to a small nursery. The bright, cheerful atmosphere of painted unicorns and enchanted toys clashed violently with the macabre scene inside. A young woman lay sprawled beside the white crib, her dark red hair pooling on the floor like blood. Once-bright emerald eyes stared lifelessly at the ceiling, a single tear still present on her icy cheek.

With the main inhabitants of the cottage long departed, nothing else in the house made a sound except for the steady tick of an old grandfather clock. The lone wizard standing in the nursery was silent as he studied his own handiwork with a dispassionate gaze. Growing impatient, the imposing man stepped carelessly across the room, his heeled boots clicking softly against the plush carpet. Long, bone-white fingers clutched his yew wand as the stranger leaned over the crib.

Ruby red eyes narrowed at the tiny form inside. A baby, barely a year old, blinked back innocently. The round emeralds, still vibrant with life, were a perfect match to the woman's. The child only watched its mother's killer with a small frown.

The man, if you could call him that, reached up to lower the hood of his robes, revealing the face of a pale, almost handsome middle-aged wizard. He could almost pass for any other human, if not for the unnatural contracting of his reptilian pupils and the sinister smile that spread across his lips. Lord Voldemort scrutinized the child with no little amusement. He began to speak in a cold, hissing voice.

"So, you are the one who shall be my downfall? The one with the 'power to vanquish' the Great Lord Voldemort, a feat not even that old meddler has ever accomplished?"

He sneered when the baby seemed much more enthralled in sucking its thumb than listening to him pontificate. He did not appreciate being ignored, and continued in an acidic tone that he supposed would frighten anyone else. "Oh, yes, your parents were quite powerful, but even they did not last very long against the Dark Lord. What makes you so special, little Potter?"

Voldemort paused as though waiting for the answer to his question. The baby was oblivious, now trying to swallow the rest of its fist whole. "Maybe when you grow older you will be more of a match for me. You might even last longer than most of my victims. But I do not have the patience to find out. Your mother and father paid for trying foolishly to resist me, and you shall be no different..." He lifted the wand, feeling his power gather at the tip as he pointed toward the child. "Let this be

a lesson to those Muggle-loving fools. No one can defeat Lord Voldemort... *Avada Kedavra!*"

The bright, neon green light of the killing curse erupted from his wand, striking the baby's forehead. The child gave an agonized wail. Voldemort began to smirk, satisfied that his job was done, only to find his face twisting into an expression of horror. His own spell, the unforgivable, *irreversible* one he had used on countless others, was not working the way it was supposed to. Instead, the beam of magic that was still connected to his wand seemed to rebound off of his victim... and rush directly back to the caster. Before Voldemort could even protest at his misfortune, the curse collided with his chest, and pain like he had never known, worse than a hundred *Crucios*, slammed through him. He let loose a piercing scream that echoed into the night as his very essence was torn apart, his body becoming a mere shell that crumbled to ashes as his soul was ripped away brutally.

The backlash of magic assaulted the walls of the cottage, and all of Godric's Hollow could surely feel the wave of excess energy. The supposedly fireproof home began to burn, as though nature herself was determined to erase any trace of the impossible events. Far away, a blaring alarm went off in the office of Albus Dumbledore, and the twinkle died from his eyes as his scarlet phoenix gave a mournful trill. He leapt up from his desk with more agility than a man his age should have, and nearly threw an entire pot of glittering powder into his fireplace. With a shouted destination and a roar of flames, he was gone.

Back inside the empty nursery, the baby sobbed as blood leaked from the new cut on its forehead, one shaped like a bolt of lightning.

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All over Europe, the magical community was celebrating the destruction of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Flocks of owls soared across the day sky as the good news was spread. Wizards and witches abandoned all propriety as they ordered extra rounds at the Leaky Cauldron and danced drunkenly around a neighbor's bonfire. A cheerful, and slightly intoxicated, Dedalus Diggle completely forgot, or rather ignored, the Muggle Secrecy Act when he set off a hundred of

Filibuster's Fireworks in plain sight. England, in particular, hadn't seen so much activity in decades. The reign of terror was over! They were saved thanks to little Harry James Potter, whom they dubbed 'The Boy Who Lived.' For years, they would tell his tale to their children, books would be published about his life, songs written about his heroic deed... and Harry would become a legend.

Meanwhile, Rubeus Hagrid had arrived at 4 Privet Drive, where he met up with Albus Dumbledore and Minerva McGonagall. He touched down on the freshly-cut lawn and turned off the noisy motorbike. A tiny bundle was clutched protectively in his large hands, the baby miraculously asleep after the roaring flight. With some reluctance, he handed the child over to the ancient wizard.

"Albus, are you sure about this?" McGonagall repeated as she walked a step behind her colleague. She didn't bother to hold back an expression of distaste as they crossed the immaculate hedges and white picket fence on their way up to the doorstep.

"I've watched these people all day, and they're the worst sort of Muggles! That woman's incessant screeching almost rendered me deaf, and that oaf of a husband... I don't know how he could fit into his car this morning without an enlargement charm! And their son! The little brat threw a tantrum when his mother wouldn't buy him some candy, and he kicked her! Of all the places to leave Harry Potter-"

Dumbledore interrupted wearily, "You know I don't have much of a choice, Minerva."

"But, Albus," she protested, "you know as well as I do that just about anyone would jump at the chance to adopt James and Lily Potter's son-"

"Exactly. The last thing we need is for a death eater to apply for guardianship. Merlin forbid if someone like the Malfoys were to gain custody. You know how much sway Lucius holds over our minister, regardless of his brief stint under the *Imperius*." McGonagall's snort of disgust showed just how much she believed *that*.

"But why can't we take 'im, sir?" Hagrid implored, his stomach wringing with guilt at the thought of leaving the baby. Lily and James would never forgive him for placing the little tyke with those Muggles. He started to wonder if Sirius Black might have been the better choice...

"He would be perfectly safe at Hogwarts," McGonagall pointed out.

"Alas, even Hogwarts is not impenetrable. No, I have already set down my own wards around the property, but they rely on blood magic, and I am afraid that Petunia Dursley is the only remaining blood relative on either side of the family. It would also be better if the child did not grow up in the spot light," Dumbledore replied, though he had an unreadable look in his eyes as he stared at the baby with the tender mark on its head.

McGonagall followed his gaze to the fresh scar, barely hidden beneath a tuft of black hair. "Is that where...?"

Dumbledore nodded solemnly.

"But how? I mean, no else has ever survived... not even James or Lily..."

"I do not think any of us will ever know the answer to that, Minerva." Crouching down, he placed the sleeping child on the cold doorstep, sending out a discreet warming charm as well. Dumbledore pulled out a thick envelope, tucking it safely into the blanket. He hoped it would explain everything to Petunia, and that she would honor her sister's memory. Straightening up slowly, he turned away, beckoning them to follow.

"Poor lil 'Arry!" Hagrid blubbered as they rounded the garden wall.

"Hagrid, get a hold of yourself! You'll wake the Muggles up!" McGonagall reprimanded him, even though her own eyes were suspiciously moist.

With a heavy heart, Dumbledore pulled out his silver instrument and gave it a click, watching as the street lamps were relit. Hagrid climbed back onto the motorcycle, revving up the engine as he lifted off the

ground. Where McGonagall once stood, a graying tabby cat padded off into the night. Dumbledore himself could not resist turning back one last time. The white bundle on the doorstep was just barely visible.

Dumbledore thought mournfully over the loss of two of his closest allies, former students, and two truly good people. No one ever expected this to happen, least of all him. He had thought they would be safe after seeing the child... But when his new spy came to inform him that Voldemort had learned the first two lines of the prophecy, it was as though the bottom had dropped out of his stomach.

The trouble wasn't over yet, not by a long shot. The secrets he was forced to keep weighed down his tired soul, but Dumbledore knew it was all for the best. It pained him to lie to Minerva and Hagrid, two of his most trusted friends, not to mention all the others in the Order who depended on his decisions. Nevertheless, it would be easier to keep the baby hidden from any remaining Death Eaters if no one knew the truth. Someday, he knew, it would come out to the public, but until then, let the Wizarding World celebrate their 'Boy Who Lived.' There was one detail that no one had ever known beside Dumbledore, and one that the Potters had taken to their graves on his advice. Harry Potter was not the same child that everyone believed him to be. In fact, Lily Potter had given birth to a *girl*, and her name was *Hallie* Potter.

Dumbledore shook his head and sighed. He just knew this particularly lie was going to come back to haunt him someday. With a last, lingering look at the infant whose entire fate hinged on a prophecy, Albus Dumbledore popped a lemon drop into his mouth, turned on his heel with a swish of starlit robes, and vanished from Privet Drive.

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"BLOODY HELL!" Hallie cursed as she ducked out of the way of *another* screaming pedestrian. Was this how everyone acted in a crisis? Hallie felt like the only sane person left.

This was just not her day. First, Aunt Petunia had decided to wake her up an extra two hours early, just to help prepare Dudley's special birthday breakfast. Then she had to watch her *dear* cousin open his presents... all thirty-seven. Back in her cupboard once more, Hallie was anticipating a calm, Dursley-free afternoon, albeit one filled with musty cats and stale biscuits. Unfortunately, luck was not on her side. Mrs. Figg had broken a leg, ironically, after tripping over one of her numerous cats.

Most people would be happy for the chance to join their family on an outing to the zoo. Hallie Potter wasn't most people. Her desire to be as distant from her relatives as possible was probably a side effect of her upbringing. After all, if your *family* locked you in a cupboard for ten years, fed you table scraps, forced you to work like a slave, insulted you constantly, and made you wear your overweight cousin's ragged hand-me-downs...! There was something very unhygienic about *that*. There was no telling how often Dudley bathed...

The trip to the zoo had turned out worse than anyone could have imagined. Not even Hallie would have anticipated that things could go so wrong, and she was generally a pessimist when it came to the Dursleys. Events always turned unpleasant when they were involved and, somehow, Hallie always ended up with the blame. Seriously, though, how likely was it that every enclosure in the immediate vicinity would suddenly unlatch, unleashing hundreds of creatures, right after her cousin and his rat-faced friend took it upon themselves to taunt her? It was pure coincidence! Or more of Hallie's miserable luck...

At the time, Hallie had been ready to tackle her cousin, regardless of his much greater size, after what he said about her parents. She got enough of that rubbish from Aunt Petunia, and she didn't need it from the pig-in-a-wig, too. One minute she was preparing herself for a rather one-sided pummeling, and the next she was blinking in disbelief at the iron doors swinging open and the sturdy fences falling



over. Now the three dozen people, who had been enjoying a leisurely outing at the zoo, were screaming in panic as they fled in all directions, at the same time trying to avoid the crazed animals underfoot. Hallie wondered just how much worse her day could get.

"POTTER!"

"Spoke to soon..." Hallie muttered.

"When I get my hands on you- ARGH!"

Just as her enraged uncle made it within five feet of her, his hands outstretched as though to wring her neck, a brown chimpanzee leapt onto his head, grunting in fright at all of the commotion. Vernon gave an unmanly shriek and ran off, trying to pry the monkey from his head. One of the unhappy zookeepers stopped to give him a hand. This task proved more difficult, though, when the monkey's grabbing paws found Uncle Vernon's walrus-like mustache perfect for balance.

Hallie silently thanked the animal before taking off through the crowd. The chimp might delay Uncle Vernon, but he was sure to be out for her blood later. She shook her head angrily. Just because Dudley happened to be leaning on the lion's cage when the bars disappeared, and fell in, before they reappeared again, didn't mean it was her fault! Besides, he was fine... While the boy had squealed like the pig he greatly resembled, the lion just twitched its nose in annoyance before going back to sleep. As long as Dudley didn't make any sudden movements, he should be fine... And again, it wasn't her fault! Not at all...

Hallie sighed when she left behind the disaster area, emerging into the reptile house they had visited earlier. Her relief was short-lived when she realized that she still had no idea what to do. The voice of her inner child, scared and whipped into obedience, pleaded that she go back, *'Maybe Uncle Vernon will calm down by the time we get home? He won't do anything permanent, lest the neighbors see. It'll be extra chores, a little less food, and a smack or two... that's all...'* The independent and slightly irrational side of her screamed, *'Move you idiot! Get away while you still can!'*

*'Hmm,'* Hallie mused, *'beg for forgiveness, or run like hell?'* Neither decision was all that appealing. Hallie supposed her best chance was to start walking home now. After all, the Dursleys were likely to take off without her, anyway, once they extracted Dudley from the lion's den, pulled the chimp off Uncle Vernon, and coaxed Aunt Petunia away the gift shop where she and several others had taken refuge... Yes, walking home was best... Maybe Hallie could spend the night in the park as well, and give her relatives some time to cool down before she returned? Hallie had the feeling that she and her cupboard would be seeing a lot of each other in the next month. Maybe she could squirrel away some food first? The hunger pangs could get so tiresome...

Hallie gave an aggrieved sigh and looked around the dimly lit glass house, empty of not only humans, but also the reptiles. Obviously, whatever was going on here had affected more than just the feline and primate enclosures. Actually, she could have sworn she'd spotted a giraffe walking around the other side of the zoo... Personally, Hallie hoped that none of the creatures she had seen in the reptile house were still around. As Dudley had so eloquently put it, one of those boa constrictors had the ability to wrap around Vernon's company car, twice, and crush it like a soda can.

"Now where was the exit?" Hallie pondered aloud. She recalled entering with the Dursleys through that door on the right... but it was difficult to remember which direction they came from originally when Dudley had insisted on backtracking to half the ice cream stands around the zoo.

*"Hiiiiissss..."*

"What was that?" Hallie squeaked fearfully. She spun around when she heard a noise coming from around one of the tanks. Her eyes widened when the shadows moved, and she caught a flash of poisonous green.

This was *really* not her day.

Hallie took a nervous step backward as the snake slithered into the light. Figures, it had to be the boa...

Eerie yellow eyes stared up at the girl as she backed into a wall. The snake just watched her, almost unnervingly, as she stood there.

*"Vai essssa maneira..."*

"What?" Hallie blinked. The stress must be getting to her. For a moment, she thought the snake was actually talking to her, and in some kind of Spanish.

*"Go that way..."*

She gasped in shock. Yes, the snake was talking to her. *'At least he was nice enough to translate...'* Hallie thought with a hysterical giggle.

She decided to ask him, just in case. *"What did you just say?"*

*"Você fala inglês?"* If Hallie wasn't so stunned, she might have recognized the flick of its head as the snake's version of an eye roll. *"I sssaid, go that way. You wanted to know the way out?"*

Hallie just nodded dumbly.

*"The humansss leave that way, menina."* The snake pointed its tail towards a silver door she had not seen earlier that was labeled 'maintenance.'

*"Uh, thanks..."*

The snake didn't reply, instead continuing on its way out of the reptile house, and toward the distant sounds of pandemonium. There was no doubt in Hallie's mind that the sounds would drastically increase in volume once he showed up.

With the snake's departure, Hallie took only a moment to assess the situation. One, Uncle Vernon was going to kill her. Two, she just held a slightly bi-lingual conversation with a snake. Three... What she going to do again? Oh, yeah, leave... Hallie didn't know how much more of this she could take. At least the day was half over...

Shaking her head in frustration, Hallie went out the side door. It was pathetically easy to get out of the zoo afterwards, regardless of all the

commotion. No one paid attention to one unattended child in the midst of all the chaos and she arrived at the parking lot without interference.

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Hallie groaned in dismay. Her eyes focused on every step of her trainers to avoid the glaring sun that was in the midst of setting. For once in her life, she was free of the Dursleys. The downside? She was wandering around London by herself, one unnaturally short eleven-year-old being jostled by the crowds as she trailed down the seemingly endless sidewalk. London had never seemed so large before, and Hallie didn't have an inkling toward which direction would lead her to Little Whinging.

Her independence had felt great for the first hour... until she realized that she had no idea what to do next. She couldn't- no, *wouldn't* go back to the Dursleys yet, and she didn't know anyone else. Most of the people who met her soon learned to stay away from 'that deranged Potter girl.' It probably didn't help that her family spread the word of her supposed insanity, at the same time vehemently claiming it came from her father's side of the family. Hallie snorted at the thought. Sure, she was a little odd, but if mental illness ran in her blood, it was sure to have come from her mother's side, and straight down to her aunt. At least it would explain the obsessive compulsive cleaning urges, and Dudley's inability to *stop* eating once he started...

She wondered what the Dursleys were doing right then... Probably celebrating, if Hallie knew anything. They were probably well aware that Hallie was lost somewhere, and more than likely hoped she would stay that way. Aunt Petunia would have wasted no time in reclaiming her cupboard. After all, she had moaned for years about 'the brat taking up precious space for her cleaning supplies.'

*'Of course,'* Hallie thought bitterly, *'they could have just moved me into one of the empty bedrooms... But, no, can't have the freak contaminating the guestroom, and Dudley would throw a fit if he had to share his second bedroom.'*

Where most people would have called the police by now, sent out a search party, even put up fliers for the return of their precious niece... the Dursleys probably went out for pizza.

*'Ah, I have such a wonderful family,' she thought sarcastically. 'Makes you wonder what idiot decided to put me with them in the first place. Better yet, why did the Dursleys ever agree to it? There must have been some sort of bribery involved...'*

Sometimes, Hallie wondered what her life might have been like had her parents survived the car crash. Would they have even stayed in contact with her mother's side of the family? She hoped not. Maybe by now, Hallie would have had tons of friends, and gone to a school far away from Dudley and his stupid lackeys... Hallie reached a hand up to her forehead, pulling aside the long black hair that hung over half of her face. Her fingertips found the familiar scar, shaped like a lightning bolt, that she had received the night her parents died.

*'Why did they have to leave me here?'* She bit her lip as she held back tears.

The blaring of a car horn broke Hallie from her mournful reverie. She started when she noticed the line of vehicles waiting for her to move out of the crosswalk. "Oops..." Hallie ruffled her already untidy hair sheepishly as she stepped onto the sidewalk. "Sorry!"

Hallie glanced around at the different shops as she headed further into the city. Her stomach grumbled at the occasional glimpse of a McDonalds. An hour later, she finally recognized a high-price clothing store to her left. It was the same one she had visited with her aunt only a week ago. Of course, the whole point of the trip wasn't for her. (Hallie was to be the proud owner of a few soggy bits of elephant skin. She just knew it would be all the rage among her peers...) No, it was so *Duddykins* could get measured for his school uniform. It was to Hallie's endless amusement when they discovered that no shop sold anything even remotely big enough for her whale of a cousin. Instead, the Dursleys had to resort to hiring a tailor, and for twice the price, at that.

Both Hallie and Dudley had finally reached an age to change schools. While Hallie was being sent to the local one, Stonewall High, Dudley

was going to his father's old private school, Smeltings. It was considered a very prestigious academy, one that provided boarding and was only affordable to the upper class. Only the best for Dudley. Of course, if the Dursleys were a little less cheap, they would have gladly sent Hallie off as well. Neither she, nor her aunt and uncle, found the seven-hour school day enough respite from each other. Dudley, of course, would be missed terribly once they pried him from his mummy's clinging grasp. Hallie decided she would celebrate that day, maybe by trashing her cousin's room and raiding the stash of sweet he kept behind the bookshelf...

As Hallie continued forward, searching for other familiar landmarks, something caused her to stop in her tracks. She paused, and scanned the street in confusion. There! She heard a slight buzzing in her ears, and the hair on the back of her neck stood at attention. It felt like something was calling to her, some invisible force tugging relentlessly. Hallie turned toward the direction she felt it coming from. She came face to face with a deserted lot.

It was nothing more than a small plot of dirt and litter fluttering in the breeze, pressed inconspicuously between a large bookshop and a music store. Shaking her head, Hallie turned to leave. However, the buzzing didn't stop. In fact, it was giving her quite the headache with its insistence. Snarling in frustration, she spun back around on her heel, emerald eyes glaring until they widened in surprise. There, in place of the vacant lot, was a dingy-looking pub. A single door led inside, with no windows to be seen. Overhead, a sign with faded letters spelled out *The Leaky Cauldron*.

Cautiously, Hallie walked toward the pub, not daring to blink on the off chance it would vanish again. Strangely, none of the passerby she cut through seemed to take any notice of it. It was almost as if they couldn't see it at all... Thinking back on the past few minutes, Hallie had to wonder if that were true.

After a moment's hesitation, Hallie pushed open the door, wincing as it swung on rusty hinges. The inside of the pub wasn't exactly worth the anticipation. For a building that could appear and disappear at will, the interior was dismally unassuming. The atmosphere was rather slow and lazy, just what one might expect from a tavern at this hour

of the evening. Hallie entered the dimly little room, scattered with wooden tables and with a large fireplace to the right. A balding old man leaned over the counter, wiping with a rag as he conversed in undertones with a customer. Was it her imagination, or did the barman's eyes flicker toward her for a second?

Trying to seem nonchalant, Hallie crept inside, taking a seat at one of the empty booths. She nearly wilted in relief as she leaned back into the soft upholstery. She hadn't had a chance to rest her feet since getting out of the car that morning. Unfortunately, she still had some walking to do if she expected to get anywhere today. Not that Hallie knew where she was going, but it was easier to delude herself into thinking there was progress. She would probably buckle under the pressure otherwise if she focused too much on the situation.

"Scuse me, miss?"

Hallie's head whipped around to find the barman standing behind her chair. *'Where did he come from?'*

"Can I get you anything?" he asked, raising a bushy grey eyebrow.

Hallie blushed, hoping she wasn't about to be evicted. "Oh, no, I'm sorry- I don't-

"Ah, not to worry, lass!" He grinned suddenly, to her utter confusion, displaying a mouthful of crooked or missing teeth. "I know just what you need... Here, c'mon..."

Before Hallie could protest, the man was hauling her up and out of her chair and toward a wooden door at the back of the room. She squirmed a little, but he didn't release her hand.

"Um, w-what are you...?" Hallie stuttered, tripping over her own feet to keep up with the strangely energetic old man.

"Welcome to The Leaky Cauldron," he spoke as though from rote, ignoring her feeble questions. "It's a pleasure to have ye here. If you're ever in need of any 'elp, just ask for old Tom." Hallie wondered just where Tom was taking her as they stepped through the door and

into an ominously empty back alley behind the pub. "Now, you'll be wanting to head right through here, Miss...?"

"Hallie," she supplied quietly, wishing she had stayed away from the creepy building to start with.

As he pulled her toward the trash bins against the sturdy brick wall, Hallie's thoughts raced. *'How stupid can I get, walking into some m-magic tavern in the middle of London! Bloody hell, what if he's some kind of kidnapper or a rapist?'*

When she was younger, Hallie recalled hearing her aunt lecture Dudley about never talking to strangers after an old woman on the street offered him some candy. Of course, when Hallie asked if the same rule applied to her, Aunt Petunia had mumbled something about saving them the trouble.

*'Such wonderful people, the Dursleys,'* Hallie reflected sourly. *'I can't believe I'm in this mess, and they are the last thing I think about!'* As Tom reached for something in his back pocket, the only words that seemed proper to Hallie at that moment were, *'I'm too young to die!'*

Rather than any one of the painful weapons that Hallie was expecting, such as a gun, or perhaps a knife, he pulled out a thin, wooden stick. That sounded like a slow death... Hallie stood frozen to the side as Tom used his vicious weapon to tap on one of the bricks above the trashcan, muttering what sounded like chess board directions as he did so.

Hallie was just considering the ramifications of making a break for it when the unbelievable happened. The solid, fourteen-foot high brick wall *moved*. A long, jagged crack appeared directly down the middle as the two halves of the wall pulled apart, the red bricks seeming to melt into each other. Hallie watched in shock as an entire village came into view behind the strange portal, full of bustling men and women dressed in clothing right out of the middle ages.

Misinterpreting Hallie's light-headed swaying for an eager bounce in her step, Tom gave the girl a small push through the archway, making her stumble onto the cobbled street. Grinning, he waved



goodbye as the wall rematerialized between them, and Hallie was left stranded in a completely new world.

Hallie stared dumbfounded at her surroundings, and the expletives that slipped out then would have made even Vernon blush shamefully. Pinching her arm almost desperately to wake up, Hallie wondered if this day would ever end...

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"M-Master D-Draco?" a rather underfed and downtrodden house-elf stuttered out as he stood in the doorway, trembling beneath his dingy pillowcase. He peered nervously into the opulent bedroom after having appeared just outside the doorway. Dobby knew far better than to pop in onto the pristine white carpets. He still bore the scorch marks from shutting his ears in the oven door as punishment last time.

The young master himself was sitting on the window seat, his icy blue eyes glazed with a sullen boredom as he stared down at the manor grounds. He didn't seem to hear the house elf, and so Dobby called out again, flinching as he did so.

"What is it?" the eleven-year-old Wizard finally snapped.

"D-Dobby is s-supposed to tell young master that his mother is wanting him down in the foyer, Sir."

"I'll be down in a moment."

Draco Malfoy glared after the house-elf as it disappeared with a frightened squeak. That filthy creature had always annoyed him. Dobby, or something, was its name, and the elf was entirely too independent for a servant. Draco had long since stopped being amused by the eccentricities of his father's personal elf. The way it always watched him was particularly disturbing... as well as its fascination with socks. Draco would never understand why his father still kept one so mentally deficient. Maybe his mother could convince him to trade it in at Knockturn for a newer, less twitchy house-elf...?

Sighing, Draco slid down from his perch (in a completely dignified manner, of course) and left the east wing to meet his mother. They were supposed to be visiting Diagon Alley today for his school supplies. It was about time, in Draco's opinion. If it were up to him, they would have bought his wand last year; but, no, his father had insisted on abiding by those ridiculous underage magic rules... Couldn't he have just bought a waiver from Fudge? The Minister had to be good for *something* with all the time they wasted currying for his favor.

Ah, well, it didn't make a difference now. He was finally old enough to get his own wand, rather than borrowing his father's to practice on the rare occasion that Lucius would give it up.

*'I'll finally be able to practice those curses Father taught me!' he thought eagerly. 'It's a shame that Mother won't allow me to go to Durmstrang, though. I heard they have an entire course dedicated to the Dark Arts, and at least their Headmaster is an old acquaintance of Father's, unlike that barmy fool at Hogwarts.'*

Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy never fought, especially not in public, but that summer they'd had an enormous row over which school Draco would attend. Lucius had wanted his heir to receive a proper education, in a place that didn't ban the Dark Arts, but Draco's mother had been adamant that he go to Hogwarts with that Muggle-loving Headmaster. She claimed he should share the same experiences they had as children. The clincher for Lucius, and the only reason he'd finally agreed, was that Draco's godfather would be able to keep an eye on him there.

*'Well, it's not a total loss,' Draco amended to himself. 'Harry Potter will be there, after all.'*

Like all wizarding children his age, Draco had grown up hearing tales of the Boy-Who-Lived. However, while others were told of his greatness, that brave little boy who saved them all, he had listened to rants about the brat that destroyed the wizarding world's last chance. His father was not happy when his former master was defeated, and by a baby, no less! The Malfoys' sparkling reputation also took a dive when Lucius was nearly arrested for being a Death Eater. Luckily, that twit, Fudge, was already firmly indebted to the Malfoys, and had no choice but to make sure any evidence against his most generous benefactor was misplaced before the trial.

So why was Draco so eager to meet Harry Potter if the boy was such a menace to everything the Malfoys stood for? According to his father, it was the perfect opportunity for his son to make alliances. If they could turn the savior of the light against Dumbledore... But Draco wasn't concerned about that, not that he would dare tell his father. He was much more interested in making friends with Potter. The ones his

parents had set him up with years ago were complete morons. Vincent and Gregory made passable bodyguards but they barely had enough brainpower between the two of them to talk in complete sentences. Oh, and Pansy! He'd heard their mothers speaking about an arranged marriage... Merlin, he hoped not! Not only did that girl resemble a pug, but every time she visited the manor, it was a chore just to get her to stop clinging to his arm!

"Draco, there you are," his mother's cool voice broke Draco out of his thoughts as he descended the staircase. He stopped halfway and gave a small bow, as pureblood custom dictated.

"Come," she beckoned with one jeweled hand, "let us be off so we can finish before your father is due back."

She held out a blank sheet of parchment (Portkey was so much neater than Floo travel) and allowed him to touch a finger to it.

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Hallie wandered down the alley for what was perhaps her third circulation. She was still in a state of disbelief over it all. Within the first five minutes, Hallie had tried to convince herself that she was hallucinating. It must have been a dream... Yes, Aunt Petunia would be along any time now, screeching at Hallie to wake up, and saving her from this nightmare of people in funny dresses and pointed hats. Another hard pinch to the arm did nothing to solve the problem. It only made Hallie yelp in pain, while several adults gave her a decidedly odd look before moving past in a wide berth.

Eventually, Hallie ended up at source of her troubles, and found a sign post beside the brick wall that she had not seen before. Apparently, she was in some place called *Diagon Alley*. 'Great,' she thought, 'my hallucination has a name.'

Wandering past several shops, Hallie took the time to stare at some of the window displays. Already, what she had seen did nothing to reassure her of her mental state. Huge black cauldrons (It was a little early for Halloween...), Billywig wings for half price (Billy-what?), and magic wands (...Were they serious?) certainly weren't your average market fare.

Walking past some sort of cleaning supply store full of decorative brooms, Hallie heard a man bellowing as he ran out of the pet shop, "Stop! Get back here, you little abomination!" The harried young clerk barreled out onto the street, waving his arms and wringing his work apron. A stream of hoots and howls came from the open door behind him.

Hallie didn't give the man's problem much thought until a small black blur ran between her legs and around the corner. Hallie remained on her feet even as her mystery assailant disappeared around the book shop. She did lose her balance, however, when a young girl hauling an enormous bird cage brushed past her shouting, "Daddy, look what I got!"

The cage (With a real owl in it!) swung right into Hallie's knee. She yelped in pain and hopped on one foot, which turned out to be a rather poor idea, as Hallie lost her balance and tumbled into a boy loitering outside the broom display. He cried out in shock as the two of them hit the cobblestones.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Hallie apologized, wincing as she pushed herself up. She glanced at the boy as he sneered and brushed off his black slacks and silk shirt. He looked about her age, though a few inches taller, with pale skin and silvery blonde hair that was slicked back neatly.

As he looked up and met her eyes, his expression softened slightly into one of cool arrogance. His eyes were a blue-gray, she noted.

"It's fine," he said, his voice sounding overly mature to her. He leaned casually against the glass window and looked her over with curiosity. "What's your name?"

"Hallie," she said, and blushed, wishing more than ever that she owned some clothes at least meant for her own gender.

"I'm Malfoy, Draco Malfoy." Draco sounded very proud of that name as he held out his hand for her to shake. Hallie clasped it briefly before letting go. "Hogwarts, too?" he asked.

"Er..." Hallie trailed off, not sure how to reply.

Her silence didn't seem to deter Draco, and Hallie wondered if he was accustomed to speaking over others. He continued on in a slightly bored tone. "My mother's up the street buying my books. We're going to choose a wand next." He turned back to the shining broom in the window, developing a yearning expression that made no sense to Hallie; it was a bloody broomstick! "Then I'm going to get her to stop here so I can have a look at the racing brooms--"

*'What?'*

"-I don't see why first years can't have their own. I think I'll bully Father into ordering one later, and I'll smuggle it in somehow."

Hallie didn't say anything, not having the slightest idea of what he was talking about. Hogwarts? Wasn't that some kind of plant? And racing brooms...? Boys were getting stranger all the time. Hallie wasn't sure if Draco was joking or not, but his personality was enough to put her off. His tone of voice was reminding her more of Dudley with every minute.

"Have you got your own broom?" the boy went on, either missing or ignoring Hallie's expression of distaste. .

"Um, no." Unless she counted sweeping the kitchen...

"Are you any good at Quidditch? I fancy myself a Seeker, or maybe a Chaser..."

*'What-itch?'* she almost asked aloud, but held back just in time. It was official. Either Draco was an escapee from the loony bin, or Hallie really was dreaming.

"Father says it's a crime if I'm not picked for my House team, and I must say, I agree. Do you know what House you'll be in yet?"

Why was Hallie meeting so many strange people today? Did she upset someone in a past life? 'Cause she was really starting to wish she'd stayed with the Dursleys. *'Now I know this day has been a disaster if I'm that desperate.'*

"No," Hallie said shortly, hoping to end the conversation soon.

"Well, no one really knows until they get there, I suppose, but I'll be in Slytherin without a doubt! Imagine being sorted into Hufflepuff, though! You'll never find a more pathetic bunch. I think I'd just leave, wouldn't you?"

*'I wish I could leave right now...'*

"Where are you parents, anyway?" he asked abruptly.

"They're dead," Hallie replied in a tight voice.

"Oh, sorry," Draco said, not sounding overly caring, "but they were our kind, weren't they?"

"I'm not sure what you mean by that." Hallie could feel her teeth grinding in annoyance.

Draco's face grew noticeably darker with that. "A *witch* and *wizard*?" he suggested in an obvious tone. "Don't tell me you're a," his face twisted into an expression of disgust, "Mudblood."

"I'm a what?" Hallie glared, feeling slighted even if she didn't know the term.

"You are, aren't you?" he sneered. "They shouldn't even let *your* kind in. Nothing but a waste of space-"

What little self control Hallie had left snapped. While she wasn't a violent person by nature, she wasn't the type to sit back and do nothing, either. Unfortunately for Draco, there were no rampant zoo animals to distract her this time.

Pulling back her fist, Hallie landed a punch right into blonde's stomach, about the best thing someone of her stature could reach. Hallie wasn't particularly strong, but Draco's reaction said her anger was fuel enough. While he doubled over gasping, Hallie stalked away, a scowl on her face. The nerve of that... that... Hallie couldn't find a word to properly describe him. Hallie turned sharply onto a nearby street, not even glancing at the corner sign. If she had, Hallie might have noticed something different about this branch of Diagon Alley.

Hallie's blood was racing with leftover adrenaline, and quite a bit of satisfaction. It felt good to fight back for once; Dudley's fat tended to rebound any hits, and his friends were always there to pound Hallie right after. Still, a little physical retribution was very therapeutic; she could already feel the day's nervous tension draining away, and life seemed so much brighter all of a sudden. Hallie didn't get very far in her positive thinking before karma made sure to steal the last laugh. Something familiar dashed out of the shadows and collided with her legs, sending Hallie head over heels. She landed rather painfully on her back, although a barrel of something squishy (she didn't want to know what) broke her fall.

Groaning, Hallie blinked up at the sky, cursing her poor luck today. Suddenly, something black and furry blocked her sight, and a tiny paw batted her nose. As she sat up, a small, dark creature slid into her lap. Finally getting a good look at the menace, she figured it to be some kind of cat. It was abnormally small and sleek compared to the ones she'd always encountered at Mrs. Figg's house. It blinked up at her innocently with oddly multicolored eyes. One minute they were gold, the next they flashed an electric blue. Large, almost bat-like, pointed ears rested on its head, and a long forked tail whipped behind it.

Dimly, Hallie registered a man grumbling over his spilled barrel. He pulled out a stick, grasping it much like Tom had, and waved it over the mess. She gasped when the contents on the ground flew up in one mass and settled neatly into the upright barrel. Shaking her head in disbelief, Hallie started to walk off, not noticing her tagalong.

Right before she tripped again, Hallie caught sight of it. The cat gave an odd bounce out of the way as she moved to kick it. Turning to glare at it, Hallie snarled, "Are you trying to kill me?"

The cat's only response was to flash its eyes a ferocious red before switching back to a disarming hazel. Seriously disturbed, Hallie tried to step around it until she heard a voice calling down the street. The young man from earlier was coming down the street, treading hesitantly as though nervous of the very ground he walked on. Hallie got the impression that it was only worry for his job that lead him to brave the area, calling out, "Here, Kitty! C'mon, you little- I mean,



wonderful dear... I have fish...? Please, come back- My boss is gonna *kill* me!" The tiny cat hissed and began to back away. When Hallie's eyes flicked down to it, the cat mewed hopefully.

Hallie didn't know how such a sinister-looking creature could appear so sweet... The eyes stared up imploringly at her... It just wasn't natural...

"Oh fine!" Hallie threw up her hands in defeat. I give up, you can come! Just stop doing that!"

She could have sworn that thing was smirking at her. The cat meowed happily and jumped onto her shoulder in one bound, draping its long tail around her collarbone like a necklace.

As the desperate man (and Hallie felt a little guilty about that) came closer to Hallie and her now obviously *stolen* pet, she ducked into one of the winding paths that branched off of this street and took off.

The further Hallie traveled into the dark alley, the more she regretted it. After several wrong turns, she was sure of only one thing. She was utterly lost. The cat was looking unusually tense as it stood perched on her shoulders, using her head to support its front paws as it scanned their surroundings. Maybe he was good for something after all.

A loud rustling caused Hallie to jump. Turning around in dread, she saw an old woman draped in heavy shawls and a dirty cloak. What Hallie could glimpse of her face showed she was *ancient*, with thick, leathery skin hanging in wrinkly folds. A few wisps of stringy white hair escaped her cloak, hanging over an empty eye socket, while her single piercing eye watched Hallie. She grinned at Hallie with a mouthful of broken, yellowed teeth, and held out a wicker basket.

"Would you like to buy anything, Dearie?" she asked in a raspy voice, rattling her wares, which Hallie now realized were numerous human fingernails.

"Um, n-no th-thank you," she stuttered, taking a few steps back. "I'm afraid I don't have money on me..."

"Are you sure...?" The wrinkled hag glided toward Hallie, seeming far more agile than some her age should be.

Hallie gulped and started to back away. Her eyes darted around, hoping to find some sort of help. Unfortunately, the alley was deserted but for the occasional peddler, and none of them seemed to fit the bill for a good samaritan. Hallie bumped into a rubbish bin and her fingers scrabbled for the lid, hoping it would do as a weapon.

"Do not fret, Dearie... I won't hurt you..." A gnarled hand was reaching for Hallie now, seemingly unconcerned by the metal lid Hallie was holding up like a shield. The cat on her head began growling.

"Stay away from her!" a new voice yelled out, startling both Hallie and the old woman. A man stepped forward, having just exited one of the nearby shops, and brandished his stick as he shouted words Hallie didn't understand. The woman dropped her tray as a bright light streamed towards her, and fled back into the shadows with a hoarse wail.

Hallie was grateful for his interference, but she didn't let her guard drop as she turned to her savior. Bright amber eyes looked down on her, seeming to glow with their own inner light. His pale and drawn face broke into a soft smile, and the man offered his hand. "Come, we should get you out of here."

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"Are you sure your alright?" the man, who'd introduced himself as Remus Lupin, asked a shaken Hallie once more as they reentered Diagon Alley. In proper lighting, she was able to observe her rescuer better. He was very thin, but Hallie wasn't one to talk, and of an average height. His clothing was rather subdued compared to anyone else Hallie had seen that afternoon, although his tweed jacket and pants were looking a pit patched. The shadows beneath his eyes as well as the flecks of grey in his sandy brown hair suggested that Mr. Lupin was much older, but Hallie thought he was somewhere in his thirties. She did have to wonder what had left him so ragged, but, despite his appearance, he seemed like a kind person.

"I'm fine," Hallie nodded in exasperation, nearly dislodging the cat. Her new friend had seemed wary of the man at first, as if he were a danger, but it had eventually backed down and taken to watching him through narrowed yellow eyes.

Mr. Lupin gave a tired grin. "That's good. You really should take care not to go down there; nasty place, certainly not for a young girl to wander on her own."

"I can take of myself!" Hallie protested.

He raised an eyebrow. "I'm sure you can," he said, humoring her.

Hallie crossed her arms and pouted. "Well, what were *you* doing down there?"

Mr. Lupin didn't look directly at her as he replied, "I was purchasing some of the ingredients for a medication I take. I'm afraid they're rather hard to find anywhere else." When he saw the concern on her face, he changed the subject. "Where are your parents? Maybe we can get you back to them. I'm sure they're worried sick."

Hallie felt a pang of hurt. "No, they died a long time ago. I came here by myself, wherever here is..." she trailed off, frowning once more.

"Are you a Muggleborn?" he asked suddenly, as though it made the situation much clearer.

"Is that a bad thing?" she asked, perhaps more sharply than she meant to.

"Of course not!" Mr. Lupin sounded shocked that she would think so.

"Oh," Hallie looked down in embarrassment. "Uh... then what is it?"

"You don't know?" He sounded more confused than ever. "Didn't you get your letter?"

Seeing Hallie's blank look, Mr. Lupin sighed, "I don't think I'm the right person to tell you. We'll get a hold of... an acquaintance of mine. He'll explain things better than I can."

Mr. Lupin led her back toward the Leaky Cauldron, laughing when Hallie started cheering at the open brick wall. He told her that was certainly a new reaction to the gateway. Taking her hand, he led her toward the large fireplace in the *Leaky Cauldron*, nodding at Tom as they passed.

He reached for the mantle, pulling down a small pot. He opened it up, revealing a fine, glittering powder, and then threw a pinch of it into the fire. Hallie wondered why it was lit in the middle of July. She lost that train of thought, though, when the man got down on his knees and shoved his head into the emerald flames. Hallie released a muffled scream until she realized he wasn't burning. In fact, she couldn't see his head at all. It was as though it had vanished completely from his body.

Soon enough, the rest of Mr. Lupin reappeared, standing up and brushing the soot off his clothes. He grinned apologetically at the open look of relief on Hallie's face. "Albus said to just send you through to his office." He stood back and held the jar out expectantly.

Glancing between the fire and Mr. Lupin, Hallie opened her mouth. "You have got to be kidding me."

After a short debate, and Mr. Lupin swearing her safety, Hallie agreed to go through the fireplace. She paused when he didn't try to follow her. "Aren't you coming with me?"

"I'm sorry, Hallie. It was a pleasure meeting you, but I really must be going now." He sounded genuinely sorry, so Hallie nodded in understanding.

"Well, I hope we meet again...?" She gazed at him questioningly. Mr. Lupin really was the first adult to ever treat Hallie so well, and she didn't want to forget him altogether. It might have seemed odd, after only knowing him for an hour or so, but something about him felt so... comforting.

Mr. Lupin dispelled her fears by gathering her in a brief hug. It didn't last very long, and then he said, "I would like that. Let's just be sure to meet up somewhere other than Knockturn Alley, alright?"

"Yeah," Hallie grinned. Then she flung the powder into the grate and stepped forward. She spoke in a clear voice, as she'd been told, and noticed the cat scurrying to get beneath her baggy shirt for protection. "Hogwarts, the Headmaster's Office!"

It was a quick but nauseating journey as she spun around in the flames. She finally came flying out and skidded onto a deep blue carpet. Hallie heard a mewling protest from beneath her, until the cat found respite by squirming out of her sleeve.

Groaning on the floor, and wondering just how many bruises she had collected that day, Hallie heard a wizened chuckle in front of her. Peeking up through her bangs, she found a large mahogany desk with a man nearly as old as the woman from earlier, though not nearly as scary. Actually, his choice of clothing was a little odd, what with the purple bathrobe covered in golden stars and moons... but really, Hallie doubted anything could faze her after what she'd seen that day. To think, it was only this morning that her biggest concern had been not burning the bacon...

The old man came to stand in front of her and gave Hallie a hand up. He then beckoned Hallie to take a seat in front of his desk. As she did so, she stared around in wonder at what appeared to be his office. The walls were filled with shelves of delicate glass instruments that whirred gently, and every remaining bit of space was taken up by portraits of people sleeping. They were so realistic that Hallie imagined she could see the rise and fall of one man's chest, and even hear the nasally snores of another. A brass perch stood behind the desk, holding a pile of gray ashes and loose feathers.

"Hello, Miss Potter," the old man interrupted her observations, beaming at her as his eyes gave off a blinding twinkle. "My name is Albus Dumbledore, and welcome to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

"Excuse me?" Hallie gaped at him. Witchcraft and wizardry? Wait... Hogwarts? Didn't that irritating little ponce mention something about that? Hallie nearly broke out in a wicked smirk when she thought of Draco Malfoy- that is, until reality reasserted itself, and Hallie's logical

side broke through. Something very strange was going on here, and this "Dumbledore" just might have the answers.

"Would you mind elaborating," Hallie asked in a strangely calm voice, "because if someone doesn't explain what the bloody hell is going on, I think I'm going to scream."

Dumbledore didn't seem the least bit upset at her use of language. "It's quite simple, Hallie. You're a witch."

"I'M A WHAT?"

So much for not screaming.

"Stupid Mudblood!" Draco ranted as he stomped into his room. His blonde hair had fallen into disarray and his silver eyes flashed with fury. Draco Malfoy was ready to throw a tantrum of epic proportions, and all because of one little Muggleborn who had dared to lay a finger on him. If he ever saw that brat again, she would rue the day her filthy Muggle parents procreated, and genetics deemed her lucky enough to hold a wand...

"How dare she!" he seethed, aiming a kick at the whimpering house-elf that trotted at his heels with his purchases. "I am a Malfoy! No one treats me like that!"

Draco snatched up a porcelain dragon on his desk and threw it, hoping to ease some of his frustration. He watched it shatter against the wall with some satisfaction, the tiny shards disappearing into the plush carpet. The house-elf squeaked in dismay at the destruction and tried to dissuade his young master from continuing. Neither noticed as the bedroom door creaked open, and a sliver cane tipped in, followed by a pair of polished black boots. The gleaming shoes paused inside as their owner surveyed the scene, cold blue eyes narrowing in disapproval.

"Draco, cease and desist at once!"

The boy's already pale complexion whitened further, and the miniature glass solar system he'd been ready to dash across the floor dropped from his fingers. The house-elf dived for the delicate model, skidding along the glass-strewn carpet in desperation. With a shaky sigh, he returned it to a new shelf, one far out of his young master's reach.

"Father!" Draco said, trying to ignore the mess around his room, and the elf running underfoot to clean it all up. He cleared his throat awkwardly. "When did you get home?"

Lucius Malfoy arched an eyebrow at his son. So much for going straight into his study...

"What have you been up to, Draco?" He let his eyes roam around, taking in the broken décor. "It is not befitting of a Malfoy to express

himself in such a manner. Just what could have caused you to forget that?"

"I'm s-sorry, sir. It won't happen again," Draco muttered, blushing with shame under his father's scrutiny.

Lucius made a noncommittal noise. "See that it doesn't." The man turned, fighting down a grimace. He sometimes forgot how much the boy took after his mother, and it was at times like this that an education at Durmstrang sounded all the better. Hopefully Draco would grow out of these juvenile fits...

Draco breathed out slowly as his father left. He leaned against the bed, some of his previous rage draining out of him. His father was right. He shouldn't have lost control like that... The Mudblood wasn't worth it, no matter how humiliated he was... bent over gasping in the middle of the street for any one of his future classmates to see... And he was almost positive the Greengrasses were in the Alleys that day...! The Malfoy heir bested by a girl who probably didn't know which end up the wand to point... And she must have a foot shorter than him!

"Young Master!"

The house-elf's startled yell interrupted Draco's rising anger. The frantic elf tried to pry the silk coverlet out of Draco's twisting hands. He let go abruptly, sending the elf sprawling on the floor, the silver sheets held protectively above its floppy ears.

Draco snarled at it to clean the mess up, and stormed out to take a long, hot bath. He needed to forget about today's little debacle. School was beginning next week, and he had far more important matters to worry about- like Harry Potter. The Boy-Who-Lived would be utterly smitten with Draco if he had anything to say about it. No one could resist the Malfoy charm, after all, and he would have the rest of his classmates eating out of the palm of his hand. Now he just had to refrain from cursing that green-eyed wench... Sweet Merlin, he hoped she wasn't anyone near the castle on September first...

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"I'M A WHAT?"



Hallie's last words rang in the silent office as she stared incredulously at Dumbledore. She was so dumbfounded that she didn't even notice as several of the previously sleeping portraits peeked open an eye to watch. A particularly sour-faced man let out a derisive scoff, but was quickly silenced by one of his fellow paintings.

"You are a witch, Hallie," Dumbledore repeated with a benign smile. He acted as though dropping such bombshells were the simple pleasures in life. Well, every old man had to get his kicks somehow.

This had to be some kind of elaborate joke... Sure, Diagon Alley was strange, and there was that creepy old woman that looked like she wanted to just eat Hallie up (and not in the overbearing grandmotherly way)... Mr. Lupin had said and done some unusual things, as well, like that trick with the fireplace, but still...

"Prove it!" Hallie said stubbornly.

Dumbledore seemed taken aback. He didn't really believe she was that gullible, did he?

"I don't believe this rubbish for a second! I don't know what the bloody hell has been happening today, but it can't be magic! I more inclined to calling this a conspiracy! Did you have something to do with the zoo? Everyone knows there's no such thing-"

Hallie's voice died out as the bearded Merlin-wannabe pulled out a pale, crooked piece of wood. A single wave followed, and the desk between them suddenly vanished, replaced by a grand dining table. Hallie's stiff-backed wooden chair suddenly lurched before morphing into a cozy purple chintz armchair. Another swish and flick filled the empty table with a delicate white china set that Aunt Petunia might have killed for, as well as two cups of piping hot tea and a tray of sugary biscuits. A small saucer of milk appeared at her feet, and the cat abandoned his comatose friend to lap it up.

Wide green eyes stared unblinkingly as the Headmaster completed his work and placed his wand on the table. His wrinkled hands lifted one of the steaming cups, and he took a deep sip, sighing in satisfaction afterward.

"Please have a cup, my dear," he offered when Hallie remained in shock. "I dare say you'll feel better afterward."

Hallie just goggled, her gaze riveted on the wand. Irrationally she thought, if it was that easy to conjure an entire tea party, Hallie would never have to slave away over a hot stove again. Shakily, she reached for her own cup when it became clear that Dumbledore was content to finish his in silence. He was correct that she felt much better as the hot liquid slid down her throat. An uncommonly fuzzy feeling came over her, and Hallie felt so calm, and quite willing to hear whatever this man had to say. Magic must be a lovely thing if it could break her out of hysterics that quickly... Or maybe the tea was drugged? Somehow, Hallie couldn't bring herself to care anymore.

Hallie took a deep breath. "Okay, say that magic is real," she conceded. She didn't believe technology had advanced enough to cover what she just seen, anyway. "You're saying that I'm a witch, as in, *I can do magic*?"

"Absolutely, Miss Potter." He gave that infuriating smile again, and started rooting through one of the cabinets behind his chair. "Now, where did I put them...?"

"And let me guess," she began in a sarcastic tone, "you're a witch too?"

"Aha!" he cried, turning back to Hallie with a small plastic bag in his hands. "Actually," he added as an afterthought, "the term is *wizard*."

"Of course," Hallie said faintly. She decided another gulp of that wonderfully relaxing tea was in order.

"Lemon drop?" Dumbledore offered, revealing that the bag was full of sour yellow sweets. Hallie declined and the old man shrugged. He popped one into his mouth and then folded both arms, leaning onto the table. "Now, down to business, Miss Potter. I trust Remus Lupin explained something of why you are here?"

"Er, not really..." Hallie frowned, thinking. "He was asking me about some letter that I obviously didn't receive, but it sounded important."

"Ah, yes..." Dumbledore's twinkling blue eyes seemed to dull as something was confirmed from Hallie's reply. "Well, Hallie, I believe Remus was referring to your Hogwarts letter."

"You said something about Hogwarts before...?"

"Yes, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. This past month you should have been notified of your invitation to our school. In fact, myself and others were getting rather worried when we didn't hear from you-

"Wait," Hallie looked up at him sharply, "did you say last month? I think... Yes, there was some sort of letter that came in the post. My uncle snatched it before I got a good look at it though," she didn't notice as Dumbledore's frown deepened. "He seemed really upset about it too, and Aunt Petunia threw a fit. They even locked me in my-" Hallie cleared her throat awkwardly, "er, bedroom."

Hallie was careful not to mention anything further. She remembered that morning in excruciating detail now. The Dursleys had panicked after reading the curving script on the outside of the thick, yellowish paper. Aunt Petunia had fainted in her tea, and Vernon had turned three different shades of red. Dudley was just as stunned as she was by his parents' uncharacteristic behavior. When Hallie made the mistake of asking if everything was alright, her enraged uncle had dragged her to the cupboard by the back of Dudley's oversized shirt and tossed her in, bellowing about freaks and stalkers. At the time, Hallie had thought it was just junk mail, like someone offering a ten-year-old a credit card. She should have known something was off when her aunt started giving her even dirtier looks than usual. It was as though Hallie's worth had declined from a cockroach to a speck of dirt.

Dumbledore sighed. "I was afraid of something like this. When I left you with your aunt and uncle, there was a letter explaining your situation. I had hoped they would show it to you when you were old enough-

"You left me there?" Hallie jumped out her seat, upsetting the tea set. Her half-empty cup crashed to the floor, just missing the cat and his saucer. He hissed and sulked over to a dusty golden perch while she

shouted herself hoarse at the old man. He took the verbal abuse calmly, letting Hallie get it all out.

"How could you? Those people hate me! Anything would have been better than Privet Drive... like an orphanage! Or some friends of the family, anything! There is *no way* I'm going back there-"

"I'm afraid I must insist, Hallie," Dumbledore interrupted gently.

"Give me one good reason," she growled, fists clenching at her sides. Hallie had finally found the person responsible for her lousy childhood, and she felt every harsh word every used against her rising up in her throat like bile. Hallie never even noticed as the tableware began to rattle and clink.

"It just wouldn't be safe. The wards will only hold so long as you are with your mother's blood-"

"Wards?" Hallie snapped back into focus. She'd been expecting some kind of speech about familial ties, but this was startling. "What are you talking about? Why wouldn't I be safe somewhere else? I'd say anywhere is safer than that house! It's not like I've got people trying to kill me..."

Hallie trailed off into silence, staring at Dumbledore when he didn't answer. The vibrant old man seemed to age before her eyes, hunching over as though the weight of the world was on his shoulders.

"That is incorrect, Miss Potter. There are indeed those who would gladly see you dead."

"...Why?"

"They want you dead, Hallie, because you destroyed their master... the same night he murdered your parents... and failed to kill you."

Hallie's mouth moved soundlessly as she struggled to find something to say. A hundred questions ran through her head at once, but only one stood out foremost.

"Murdered? What are you...? How...? MY PARENTS WERE KILLED IN A CAR CRASH!" Hallie screamed at the headmaster, daring him to say differently.

"No, they were not." Dumbledore sighed, and leaned forward to placate the heaving girl as she began to hyperventilate. "Please, retake your seat before I explain." He waited for her to do so before continuing. "I left a letter for your aunt the night I dropped you on their doorstep. I had hoped they would show it to you one day, explain just how special you are to us, the entire wizarding world."

"But I'm just Hallie," she muttered into her lap. "I'm nothing special... nothing at all."

"That is where you are wrong. You see, it all begins with a man calling himself Lord Voldemort, although many today will refer to him as You-Know-Who or He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named."

"Why?"

"Because they fear him. He did many things, terrible things. He was a wizard of unrivaled power who sunk deep into the Dark Arts to gain power. Voldemort also held a grudge against the Muggle population, non-magic people. He believed they were unworthy of existence, and sought to wipe them out. He gathered his own followers, and he had many. They terrorized the wizarding world for at least a decade. Those were dark times. One never knew who could be trusted, and more died every day until, at last, he was defeated."

"How? I thought you said he was all-powerful. Who could-"

"You did. No one is quite sure how, but something about you stopped him."

The tiny black cat meowed from the floor during a pause in the awkward conversation. He leapt into Hallie's lap, trying to butt his head against her limply folded hands. She began petting him absently.

"Many wizards and witches fought against Voldemort, despite how hopeless it might have seemed at times. Your parents did so, and quite admirably, if I might say so. At one point, I learned from a spy

that Voldemort might come after your family. I sent them into hiding in the hopes that they would be safe. But it was not to be so. On Halloween night, you were a little over a year old then, he found your home in Godric's Hollow. He killed both your mother and father, and then went to finish the job-

"The green light," Hallie whispered under her breath. She'd had many dreams over the years, unpleasant ones filled with a woman's screams, and a flash of luminous green light... All this time, she had imagined it coming from twin headlights, just before their car barreled into another, with metal screeching and tearing... She'd dreamt of the green light ending her parents' lives in the crushing pain of broken bones and splattered blood... Now she wondered if magic lights did the same. Did her mother and father feel any pain...?

"However," Dumbledore added as Hallie zoned out, "the killing curse rebounded off you, leaving the very scar on your forehead. It hit Lord Voldemort, tearing him from his body, and setting the house on fire. A colleague of mine retrieved you from the wreckage and brought you to your aunt and uncle."

"So, he's gone?" she asked after a moment. There was no need to clarify who 'he' was.

"That, I cannot say. The Ministry of Magic believes we have seen the last of the Dark Lord. I think he may yet return. It is only a matter of time."

"Well, bollocks," Hallie commented with a scowl. She was finding an awful lot to curse about that day... "So, let me see if I've got this straight. I defeated a murdering psychopath when I was a baby by bouncing magic spells of death off my forehead? Go me," she joked weakly.

Dumbledore gave a light chuckle. "Yes, but unfortunately there is more..."

"More? You've got to be kidding me! What else could there be? Am I long-lost royalty, third cousin twice removed on the queen's side?"

"Not quite, but you are rather famous in our world, the result of saving hundreds of lives."

Hallie blushed. "Oh."

"There is something else I should discuss with you, though," he cleared his throat, suddenly looking uncomfortable. This was one topic that Dumbledore dreaded. He subtly placed a shield or two around some of his more delicate possessions in the office. Hallie didn't pick up on anything unusual, but the portraits began to ease warily out of their frames.

"Go ahead then," Hallie gestured. "I doubt there's much more that can surprise me after today..."

A few more shields wouldn't hurt. Oddly enough, the creature that had arrived with Miss Potter had relocated to one of the farthest corners of the room.

"Your parents were forced into hiding right after your birth. There was hardly any time for them to celebrate what should have been a joyous occasion. They never had the chance to see their friends, either, only sending out an owl before they were forced under the *Fidelius* charm. I also convinced them to take some extra precautionary measures, incase something should happen to them. It was my idea to keep the details of the newest Potter vague. The less the world knew about you, the harder it would be to find you later on, should any of Voldemort's supporters seek to harm the helpless infant of a prominent light family. Therefore, James and Lily made up a fake birth certificate for the Ministry records, with the assistance of a contact of mine at Saint Mungo's Hospital. They put down the name Harold, or Harry, Potter, after James' father."

"Wait," Hallie interrupted, "you told people I was a boy?"

"Yes, Hallie. You see, your parents had plans to send you to some close friends if things got too dangerous, and this way, Voldemort's followers would not be looking for a baby girl..."

"Why do I get the feeling there's more to this?" Hallie raised an eyebrow.

Dumbledore smiled, although it came out closer to a grimace. "Are you sure you wouldn't like a lemon drop?"

"No thanks." Hallie realized that he was stalling.

He put one in his own mouth, sucking on it for strength. "Now, where was I? Oh, yes. Well, I told you that the wizarding world considers you a hero, their savior. When the other students arrive, you will find that anyone with magical parents will have heard your name. Your story is known throughout all magical society, Hallie."

"But- Hold on..." Hallie felt the bottom of her stomach drop. He couldn't mean that... "You said people thought I was a... Oh, no... Don't tell me-"

"When you defeated Lord Voldemort, the wizarding community was still under the impression that you were a bouncing baby boy. After coming to the conclusion that I would have to leave you in the Muggle world, hidden from any who might harm you... I let them continue to think so."

"WHAT?" Hallie screeched. "But what am I supposed to do? Tell everyone I'm Harry Potter's illegitimate sister?"

"Of course not, my dear girl. I was thinking of telling them exactly the opposite. We simply let them think you are Harry Potter, and we can take care of your appearance quite easily. With a little wand work, no one will be able to tell that you were ever female-"

The cups were rattling again.

"-I'm a bit rusty on my charms, but I daresay we'll manage. Glamour spells really are magnificent. I can even keep it from being detected by anyone but an Auror-"

Dilys Derwent's portrait debated the wisdom of popping into Mungo's and asking for a Healer on standby, just as a precaution. Everard gave her an emphatic nod as he and the other Headmasters kept a close eye on the frighteningly quiet little girl.



“-and you’ll be able to hide under the façade of the Potters’ son, returning to your aunt and uncle every summer, safe in the knowledge that no wizard will recognize you on the street-“

Hallie felt some kind of pressure swelling within her. It was either magic or indigestion from that suspicious sandwich she had for dinner last night. She hoped it was the former because Hallie had the strongest urge to blow something up...

“-I really do believe it’s for the best. Your safety is all that matters-“

The black cat began searching for an escape. It even contemplated the tower window for a moment, regardless of the open skies beyond.

“-So, what do you say, my dear?”

"NO WAY."

One of the curious silver instruments on Dumbledore’s shelf let out a piercing whistle.

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A thoroughly frustrated Professor McGonagall stalked through the halls of Hogwarts on her return from the Dursleys' residence, but not before hexing one of their perfect shrubs to a charred crisp. She’d been waiting to do that for ten years...

As she headed to the Headmaster's office, she nearly ran into Professor Snape, who was resurfacing from a long weekend brewing potions in the dank dungeons. A single blink of his shadowed eyes was the only surprise he showed at her abrupt appearance.

"Watch where you're going, Minerva," he snapped. Snape paused before leaving as he noticed the poorly-concealed fury in her pinched lips. "What has you in such a fit this time?" he drawled.

The severe woman chose to ignore his comment in favor of letting out some of her rage. "Severus, I was just at Privet Drive-"

"I should have guessed," he sneered. "Another Potter causing trouble? The term hasn't even started yet, and the brat is vying for

attention-" Before Snape could launch into a full tirade, McGonagall had already left, robes billowing in a manner eerily reminiscent of the irate potions master himself.

"Merlin's beard!" McGonagall cursed uncharacteristically. She had never expected this year to begin with such difficulty. Harry Potter was finally starting as a first year, or at least he would be if she'd gotten a reply. Dozens of letters had been sent off to Surrey, and not a single owl had come back. After speaking with his guardians, she knew that a good deal of them had been burned in the fireplace, flushed down the toilet, and even shredded in some kind of kitchen device. She had warned Albus all those years ago! They should never have left the boy with those rotten Muggles! Well, there was nothing to do but go see the Headmaster. Let him find a solution because McGonagall was at her wit's end!

She set off toward the entrance to Dumbledore's office. However, when she got there, she sighed in exasperation. She could never remember the ridiculous passwords he came up with!

"Lo, Minerva. Ye be lookin' fer Dumbledore?" Rubeus Hagrid asked as he passed by the stone gargoyles.

"Why, yes, Hagrid. Where are you off to?"

"Goin' ter see Professor Quirrell 'bout the thestrals. Somethin' in the forest's been makin' em act up. Was gonna ask him this mornin' fer help, he jus' got back, but I couldn't find 'im anywhere..."

"That's odd. Well, I do hope the thestrals will be up to pulling the carriages this year."

"Aye."

"Hmm, back to business. Hagrid, do you have any idea what the password is this time?"

"Nope. Why don' ye jus' start namin' as many sweets as ye can?"

McGonagall sighed in disgust, "Oh, alright." She was never a fan of sweets. She tried to recall what the students were always sneaking

into her classes. "Er, Bertie Bott's? Sugar Quills, Pumpkin Pasties, Cockroach Clusters, Licorice Wands, Blood Lollipops, Droobles Best Blowing Gum...? Chocolate Frog?" The stone gargoyle groaned and sunk into the floor, revealing a spiral staircase.

"What is with Albus and sugar? You'd think he was only a tenth of his age!"

"Well, ya know, he's been especially fond 'o the Chocolate Frogs since they gave 'im his own card," Hagrid chuckled. It was true. Dumbledore seemed to think his face on a Chocolate Frog card was worth more than his Order of Merlin, First Class.

McGonagall just rolled her eyes and bid Hagrid farewell. He lumbered off, humming slightly under his breath. Steeling herself, McGonagall stepped onto the moving stairs, finally coming to the oak door with its golden knocker. She raised one fist to knock, anticipating Albus' voice welcoming her in before she even managed it. McGonagall was disappointed, however, when something else altogether interrupted. There was a sound like thunder booming, and she could have sworn that the heavy door curved outward for a moment under some kind of pressure from the other side. Alarmed, she pulled out her wand and charged into the office uninvited.

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Hallie's flat out refusal hung in the air between them as she glared at the placid Headmaster. She was pleased, however, to note a small twitch in his left eye as he (unbeknownst to her) dealt with the backlash of his own protective wards. His office remained safe, but for how long was the question, as Hallie panted with exertion and clenched her fists into the armrests.

Before she could continue telling Dumbledore just where to shove his 'brilliant idea,' the door behind her burst open and a stern old woman in dark robes and a pointed hat ran in. McGonagall stopped, looking rather foolish as she realized that the Headmaster was perfectly fine. Well, for now, she amended as she recalled her previous ire. Her frigid gaze landed on Dumbledore, who was beginning to feel rather sorry for himself, and she completely missed the other occupant of the room.

"Ah, good afternoon, Minerva. How can I help-"

"We don't have time for pleasantries, Albus! Harry Potter is *missing*, and those wretched Muggles wouldn't tell me a thing! They claimed that the 'freak' ran away this afternoon, and they hadn't seen 'it' since. These are the kind of people you leave our savior with? Have you finally gone senile, Albus?"

"Minerva, if you would just take a seat, I could explain-"

"You had *better* explain!" she barked, strands of her graying hair coming out of its bun with stress.

"I take it your visit with the Dursleys didn't go well?" the Headmaster asked.

Hallie sat by silently, hoping for details of her relatives. So, Dumbledore had actually sent a witch to find her? She could just imagine the sort reception the woman got from her aunt and uncle. They didn't appreciate anyone odd turning up at their doorstep, in plain view of the gossipy neighbors. It would only double their upset if that person asked for Hallie. After all, they still hadn't forgiven Hallie for the *last* time someone came calling on her account.

*'At least she wasn't with the police. Of course, I don't know why I got all the blame. It wasn't my fault that I ended up on the roof of the school... I think.'*

"Didn't go well? Ha!" The woman let out a stiff laugh. "Those people were impossible! They have no idea what happened to their own nephew, and I very much doubt they care. At this rate, we'll never find the boy! He could be anywhere, lying in a ditch somewhere, or Merlin forbid, with dark wizards! We've got to find him, Albus! We should send Hagrid at once-"

"Eh-hem."

A quiet voice cleared their throat, interrupting the panicked witch. She looked flustered for a moment as she searched for the source of the disruption. Her spectacled eyes landed on a young girl, smaller even than most first years, who sat dwarfed in the large plush chair in front

of the headmaster's desk. Wide green eyes blinked up at her, the corners of the girl's mouth twitching.

"Oh, my-" McGonagall floundered for a moment, unsure after losing her composure in front of a student. While she didn't remember ever meeting the girl, there was a certain familiarity about her.

"Pardon me," she said, straightening her robes as she observed the girl, "I am Professor McGonagall."

She held out a wrinkled hand, and Hallie grasped it lightly, smiling crookedly. She couldn't believe what she was about to do to the poor woman. It just wouldn't be right...

*'Oh, I can't help myself.'*

Hallie's gaze flickered toward Dumbledore for a moment, and he felt a chill or foreboding run down his spine. For a moment, he thought it was James Potter himself with that daring glint, but in Lily's emerald eyes.

"Hello, Professor. I'm Hallie. Hallie Potter." As she said it, Hallie tilted her head upward and to the side slightly, allowing her long bangs to fall back. She bit back a smirk as the old woman noticed the lightning bolt scar.

Instead of paling or fainting, as Hallie had expected, McGonagall turned a sickly white, her thin lips tightening. She released Hallie's hand and turned to stare at the twinkling headmaster who was still sucking on a lemon drop and smiling serenely. However, the slight twitch of his beard belied his nerves as the stern woman rose to her full height of little more than five feet. The very hackles on the woman seemed to rise, like an angry cat, as she narrowed her eyes at Dumbledore.

Using a voice reserved only for the Weasley twins, McGonagall growled out, "Albus, what have you done now?"

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"Oh, Albus, you didn't! What in Merlin's name were you thinking?" McGonagall was flabbergasted by all she had heard. The witch didn't know whether to congratulate her old friend on taking the child's safety so seriously... or to practice her seventh year Transfigurations syllabus on him. She was quite partial to the latter. To think, he had fooled the entire Wizarding world... They would lynch him when they found out... And that was where McGonagall came to the last item of discussion.

Dumbledore wanted to continue his ruse by placing one of the new first year students under a powerful glamour charm. Whether it was truly to protect the girl, or to save his own neck from the masses, McGonagall could not approve. James and Lily Potter had been two of her most promising Gryffindors in their day, and she wasn't about to let their daughter be subjected to such madness! It was bad enough she'd been raised by Muggles, they didn't need to destroy Hallie's sense of self any more by making her a boy!

Hallie herself was silently rooting the older woman on. At least this confirmed that not all magical people were barmy. After all, her only experience so far amounted to a megalomaniac Dark Lord, the toothless old bartender that she'd mistaken for a kidnapper, the frightening creature in Knockturn alley, the gentile Mr. Lupin, Albus Dumbledore (no explanation needed), and now... Minerva McGonagall. She was a bit overwhelming, though, and Hallie was just glad those chilling glares were not directed at her. Thankfully, McGonagall was there to push her case and make the old man see sense. How could he seriously consider making her a boy? As if Hallie would ever agree to something so ridiculous...!

Because she wouldn't. Nuh-uh, no way, not in this lifetime...! Why did the decision feel like it was already far from in her hands?

"I believed it was the right thing, Minerva. I really had no other choice," Dumbledore tried to defend himself to the fuming teacher, simultaneously avoiding eye contact with her.

"No choice!" McGonagall repeated sardonically. "We are speaking of you, aren't we, Albus? It's *a/ways* your choice, and the rest of us can only hope that the consequences aren't permanent!"

The tiny cat in Hallie's lap flicked its head back and forth as the two adults argued, color-switching eyes not settling on either one. Hallie echoed his movements. It was kind of like watching a tennis match, and it seemed that McGonagall was winning. Hallie crossed her fingers.

"Now, Minerva, I'm certain my plans don't turn out *that* badly-"

"Do remember that we are still dealing with Peeves, won't you. 'It's only temporary, I'm sure,' you said. 'And Hogwarts could use its own poltergeist to liven things up...' Just be thankful that Argus didn't know about your *choice* before he accepted the staff position!"

"Ah, but it does seem to have turned out for the best... and the Weasley twins do give the old prankster a run for his money, don't you think-"

"Albus, enough! I've known you long enough to tell when you're stalling. Miss Potter's welfare is not up for debate, and I will not allow this farce to take root!"

Hallie would be clapping if she didn't think it inappropriate at that moment.

"I'm afraid I must insist, Minerva."

'No!' Hallie blanched. '*He can't do this!*'

McGonagall made one last attempt, "But James and Lily-"

"-Would want their child safe." Dumbledore interrupted. "This is, in fact, our only solution. As of yet, the Wizarding World does not know that Hallie is what she is, and you know just how expectant even the students are to see Harry Potter on September first. If we were to reveal the truth now, it would only put unnecessary pressure upon Miss Potter, when she'll have enough to deal with, adjusting to Hogwarts. The added attention will also place her at greater risk. The press will have a field day with the news, and a few of society's less savory characters will find a renewed interest in the vanquisher of Lord Voldemort. Keep in mind, that while she is as safe as can be at her relatives' home, Hogwarts is not impenetrable."

Dumbledore put up one hand to stop whatever the other professor might have said at that moment, when she puffed up indignantly at the slight to her territory. "Remember that we will have more than just Miss Potter's safety to contend with, this year, especially. I do not want to give *anyone* more reason to try their wand at the castle's wards."

Hallie wondered at the emphasis Dumbledore gave his last sentence, but she was far more concerned by McGonagall's seemingly dying protests. The older woman appeared to subdue at those last comments, and her face took on a resigned cast.

Hallie really didn't have a choice in this, did she?

"Bloody hell," Hallie muttered under her breath.

Dumbledore abruptly turned his attention back to her, and Hallie got the feeling he'd heard that. His expression was certainly bright enough to seem amused now that he was ready to turn the topic back onto his cross-dressing scheme.

"But back to the subject at hand," he said, "I think this could be a great opportunity for you, Hallie."

Hallie raised an eyebrow incredulously, "How do you reckon that?"

"In this way, you will be able to make a name for yourself behind the mask of Harry Potter."

"Albus," McGonagall said in a dry voice, "that makes absolutely no sense."

"On the contrary, imagine the reaction of the Wizarding World when they discover that the child they've regarded as the second coming of Merlin for a decade is only a girl."

"Excuse me?" Hallie interrupted, feeling rather annoyed.

Dumbledore noticed her reaction and hurried to explain, "No offense meant, my dear, but the Wizarding World can be rather old-fashioned



at times and quite prejudiced. At least, if they have some time to get to know you, it will ease their feelings toward you."

Hallie took a moment to let those words sink in. What he said brought about a few thoughts which she would much rather not have.

*'He's right...' Hallie silently grumbled, 'It's bad enough that I'm going to be famous, but to have to deal with a bunch of reporters, all clamoring to hear about my private life when they learn the truth... And what about my classmates!' she realized with a sinking feeling.*

Hallie knew very well what it was like to be looked down upon by her peers, and she had no wish to repeat the experience. In the so-called 'Muggle' world, Hallie was just "that weird kid," with an over-bearing bully of cousin and not a friend to speak of. No one would associate with her for fear of upsetting Dudley, and the idea of someone actually standing up to him was laughable. After all, Dudley was bigger, stronger, had no qualms about hitting girls or kids with glasses, and he kept his own gang, who followed his word as though it was the unspoken law of the playground. Hallie just wasn't worth the trouble making an acquaintance with, and after years of getting by on her own, Hallie had deemed the other kids just as worthless.

For once, she actually considered Dumbledore's mad proposal. Maybe, just maybe, if others got to know *Harry Potter*, they would be a little more accepting. Hiding behind the phony identity, she could actually be herself, so to speak. She wouldn't have to worry about anyone judging her for being a girl, specifically one who had defeated the most fearsome dark wizard in a decade. Sure, Hallie would have to put up with all that Boy-Who-Lived nonsense, but that was a given. No matter what she did, she would still have to endure the fame. So why not use it to her advantage?

*'Besides,' Hallie broke into a devilish grin, 'I can just imagine the look on everyone's faces when the truth comes out...'*

Dumbledore was reiterating his plan to McGonagall as Hallie thought. The two were arguing over the technical aspects of her disguise, not that any of that magical jargon made a wit of sense to the newly-discovered witch. Without giving herself the time to back out, Hallie finally spoke up. "I'll do it."

Hallie's quiet announcement caused various reactions. The cat in her lap meowed into the awkward silence, tail thumping against her leg. McGonagall's jaw went slack as she stared at the girl incredulously. Hallie supposed that even if the woman had given in to the Headmaster, she was expecting a little fight from Hallie. Dumbledore looked straight at her, his half-moon spectacles flashing. He smiled benignly and pulled out one of his lemon drops.

"Splendid!"

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"Sweet Merlin..." McGonagall whispered as she gazed down at Hallie. "She looks just like James..."

Dumbledore stood next to the professor, looking just a bit smug as he twirled his wand in satisfaction. Both stood behind the girl as she gaped at the reflection before her eyes, courtesy of the full-length mirror the Headmaster had conjured. Hallie was feeling a bit uncomfortable under their scrutiny, but even she had to admit her disguise was good. If not for the constant reassurances that she was indeed still a girl (Hallie had taken a worried peek downward before the Headmaster reminded her that it was only a glamour spell) then even she would have trouble recognizing herself.

In some ways, she still looked like the old Hallie; same messy black hair and bright green eyes. But in others, she was the perfect semblance of the brother she never had, nor wanted, after dealing with Dudley for ten years. If McGonagall was to be believed, then the spell was modeled after Hallie's father. She could only assume that was true as the Dursleys would never go to the trouble of burning a photo of her parents, much less putting one out on display. For Aunt Petunia, it was just so much easier to pretend they didn't exist, although, Hallie did throw a wrench in those kind of delusions...

Awed green eyes ran over the image once more, trying to map out every detail of her new appearance.

*'Better get used to it,'* a small voice in the back of her head whispered.

Hallie was taller for one, at least by a few inches, which wasn't that much of an achievement for her. Her limbs also looked a bit longer,

but less delicate. She held up a boyish hand and noted the slightly thicker fingers. Looking upward, she examined her facial features, which were sharper compared to her usual button nose and rounded chin. Some things seemed no different, to her relief, such as the stubborn set of her mouth, and the wide emerald eyes framed by dark lashes. One of the major changes, of course, was lying on top of Hallie's head.

Her long black hair was much shorter, and stuck up in a thousand random directions. It looked like someone had hacked it off with a pair of hedge clippers. Actually, it was reminiscent of the haircut her Aunt Petunia had tried to give her when she was nine...

Back then, Hallie's hair had reached her waist in long, matted tangles. It wasn't her fault it was so messy. She was just never concerned about appearances when hiding under random bushes from Dudley's gang. Her aunt and uncle were always on her to comb her hair. Hallie once had the gall to reply that they at least give her a brush. For that, she spent the rest of the day in the hot sun, weeding the flowerbeds while her aunt guarded the water hose like a hawk.

Then Petunia had the bright idea to cut Hallie's hair herself. Much to the young girl's horror, when the scissors finally paused, her hair was butchered. The sides were chopped off to an inch, although her bangs were left, 'just to hide that hideous scar.' Hallie had spent the night sobbing in her cupboard, but when she woke up the next morning, it had all grown back, albeit a few inches shorter. Hallie was oddly tired as she hurried to start breakfast, but her aunt's shrill scream when she entered the kitchen was like a bucket of cold water to her drowsy senses.

Needless to say, Hallie was not greeted with a smile and wave that morning (not that she ever was). She was given an entire week confined to her cupboard for fixing her hair, even if she couldn't explain how it had happened. Fortunately, her aunt never attempted to cut her hair that short again. She didn't want to elicit any other *freaky* reactions.

Coming back to the present, Hallie sighed. At least she could admit that she didn't look *that* different. It was probably a good thing that

she hadn't had the chance to develop any of those feminine curves she would get with puberty. As of right now, her thin figure was just as flat as it had always been. Her cousin's overly-large jeans and t-shirt only enhanced the effect.

Continuing her observations, Hallie's eyes froze as they caught sight of the familiar lightning bolt scar. She fought the urge to glare at the cause of all her current problems. It stood out more clearly than ever, peeking through her short bangs. It was faded with age, but still easily noticeable to anyone looking for it. Hallie supposed the headmaster had left it out in the open on purpose. After all, what was the point of trying to be the Boy-Who-Lived if no one saw his famous scar?

"Now, just one last thing, and then we're finished," Dumbledore's voice interrupted her bitter musings as he stepped around her, something cupped in his hands. He lifted it for both Hallie and McGonagall to see. Dangling from his fingers was a smooth, oval-shaped red stone hanging on a long silver chain. He draped it around the girl's, or rather, *boy's* neck, and Hallie lifted it up curiously.

Upon closer inspection, she saw that the gem wasn't red at all, but more of a clear glass that glowed inside like a burning ember. Tiny runes were carved into the stone in a pattern that made little sense to Hallie.

"What does it-" Hallie began to ask, but gave a small sound of surprise when she heard a foreign voice leave her mouth. It was a bit deeper than was she was used to, obviously belonging to a young boy.

"I guess that answers my question," Hallie mumbled, still unused to the way she sounded.

"Yes, but that isn't all," Dumbledore corrected happily. He seemed to be enjoying this far too much... "This charm is the focus of the glamour. While a normal glamour spell would last no more than a few hours perhaps, depending on the strength of the caster, this necklace will ensure it has no limits. The stone will anchor the different charms cast on you. There are several, in fact. As long as you wear it, the spells will hold."

"Are you sure there's no way anyone would find out?" Hallie asked. She was curious about how foolproof this stuff was. "I mean, what if someone bumps into me or something? Won't they be able to tell I'm a bit shorted than I look?"

"Not all," Dumbledore answered. "That is one of the spells I've placed on you. It's a derivation of the *Confundus*, and it will keep anyone from noticing such details. However, I must once again stress the importance of the necklace. Do not remove it for anything, or the spell-work will collapse, and I will have to replace it. It is best if no sees it either."

Dumbledore held up his wand as he spoke. He pointed at the stone and said some words in another language. Hallie didn't quite hear it, but when she looked down at her chest, the necklace had vanished. It was odd, because she could still feel its light weight, and when she reached up a hand, still felt the smooth chain as well.

McGonagall watched the proceedings with a slight frown on her face. She still wasn't sure she agreed with the entire plan. So many things could go wrong... But it was the girl's decision...

"I suppose it'll have to do, Albus," she sighed in resignation.

The headmaster smiled gratefully. He was glad to have the support of one of his most trusted colleagues. It had been a strain all those years ago to lie to his friends about the young Potter, especially when those meaning well asked to visit the boy on occasion. However, just knowing that Minerva was privy to the information lifted a great deal of the weight from his already over-burdened shoulders.

Hallie turned away from the mirror at last, fiddling with the unseen necklace. She knew there was no turning back now. She'd already agreed to do this, and she would see things through. She only hoped she didn't come to regret it...

Taking a deep breath, she addressed the adults, "What now?"

Dumbledore smiled down at her, the twinkle in his eye brighter than ever, "Now we put your disguise to the test."

Without offering further explanation, he moved over to the lit fireplace. Reaching above the mantle, he extracted some of the glittering powder he kept nearby. Tossing it into the Floo, he called out, "Rubeus Hagrid!"

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Hallie stumbled out of the fireplace, coughing up soot. She would never get used to that... In her arms, Hallie held tightly to her struggling cat. The poor creature's black coat was tinted an ashy gray. His paisley eyes were rolling dizzily. It was obvious he didn't appreciate that travel method either.

Looking around, she recognized the same pub she'd left only a few hours ago. It was a bit of a shock to realize just how much had occurred in one day. Her entire life had been turned upside down, and the sun hadn't even gone down yet.

The fire behind her flared once more, and Hallie had the sense to step out of the way. A moment later, the largest man Hallie had ever encountered stepped out of the Floo. The fact that he was probably twice the size of the entrance left her boggled as to how he even fit. However, Hallie thought it best not to ask that question. For now, she would go with the simple solution that it was magic.

The giant man unfolded himself and stood up, miraculously clean of ash. He was a good seven feet tall at least, Hallie only just reaching his waist. He wore a long brown coat with sturdy boots, and had a mane of wild black hair. His face was nearly hidden by a bushy beard, but two crinkled black eyes shined down at her.

Suddenly, Hallie saw his beard twitch in a happy grin, and before she knew what was happening, the man had swept her up in a choking hug, his muscled arms lifting her right off her feet. The cat gave a startled hiss, diving out Hallie's grasp to avoid being smothered. Whiskers twitching irritably, he wandered off.

"Oh, Harry! I missed yeh! Haven' seen yeh since yeh were a lil' baby! Hope the Muggles weren' too bad. Woulda taken yeh in me'self if Dumbledore'd allowed it-"

"Er- excuse me-" Hallie gasped, trying to get his attention. Really, she was touched by his greeting, but there was one little problem...

"Eh?" He looked down at her.

"I can't breathe," Hallie wheezed.

"Oops!" He quickly released the struggling child, careful not to drop her. He gave a sheepish smile as she recuperated.

"Sorry there, jus' a bit overwhelmed. Anyway, lemme introduce me'self. Name's Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper o' the Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts."

"Yes," Hallie smiled, "Dumbledore told me a little about you. He said you were going to help me find my school supplies?"

"Yep." Hagrid began to lead her toward through the pub. Hallie had to hurry to catch up. For every one step he made, she had to compromise with at least three more. The room was more crowded than it had been earlier, but Hagrid easily cut a path through. Most of the tables were occupied by what Hallie now knew were witches and wizards. They were all chatting merrily over drinks, while the bartender bustled around, cleaning and occasionally speaking with a customer.

"Ah, Hagrid!"

The toothless bartender waved Hagrid over, drawing attention to the man and Hallie. She was hesitant to follow when Hagrid walked over, wondering if Tom would recognize her. But then she realized he couldn't possibly. After all, she wasn't even a girl anymore!

"Bless my soul... Is that- Harry Potter?"

Hallie groaned as his bulging eyes settled on her forehead. So much for anonymity.

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What followed was perhaps one of the most horrific experiences of Hallie's life, and that was counting the time she'd walked in on Dudley in the shower. To cut a long story short, she was mobbed.

After Tom's rather loud declaration, the entire bar had frozen in shock before moving as one entity to swarm Hallie and Hagrid. She must have shaken a thousand hands, especially since many of her so-called admirers came back for more. They were all clamoring to speak with her, trying to express their gratitude.



Really, she'd known she was famous after that talk with Dumbledore, but this went beyond anything she could have expected. Sure, she defeated the guy that was terrorizing the wizarding world, but it wasn't like she'd meant to!

*'Okay, that came out wrong,' Hallie corrected herself. 'The point is, I didn't just appoint myself savior of the wizarding world. At this rate, they'll be expecting me to solve all their problems! I'm only eleven, what can I do?'*

The wizarding world had put her on a pedestal before she was even two years old. It would make sense for them to have even higher expectations now that she was older. In fact, if Hallie recalled correctly, one couple had tried to get her to bless their newborn baby.

*'Maybe it's not too late to tell Dumbledore I'd rather go undercover as Harry Potter's long-lost cousin or something?'* Hallie sighed in hopelessness. It was definitely too late.

If not for Hagrid, Hallie doubted they would have ever gotten on with their shopping. His booming voice had reached over the crowd when he announced they had to get going. When the people didn't immediately part, he'd just lifted Hallie once again and carried her out. On their way through the brick wall, Hallie spotted her cat trotting after them. It was amazing that he'd escaped at all. She had been worried for a while that he'd gotten trampled by the masses.

Their first stop was at Gringotts, the wizarding bank. Hagrid had explained to Hallie that they were going to get money from the vault her parents left her. She was relieved to hear that. She didn't think it would go over well with her aunt and uncle if she showed up on their doorstep asking for money to buy a magic wand.

*'Well, it would be funny...'* Hallie thought with a smirk, *'But it's not worth the screaming. Wouldn't want to scare the neighbors, after all.'*

Thanks to Dumbledore, Hallie already surmised she would be going to back to the Dursleys come summer, an event she was not looking forward to. Hopefully, they would have gotten over their anger by then. Speaking of the zoo incident, she wondered how Dudley had gotten out of the lion's cage...

The trip down to her vault was enjoyable, at least for Hallie. Her cat had refused to get in the cart, clinging to an unhappy goblin instead. Hagrid had climbed in with some trepidation, which Hallie later realized had something to do with the unnatural shade of green he turned every time the cart sped up.

She gathered several handfuls of the strange coins in her bursting vault before they moved onto another one further down in the bank. She had asked the goblin steering the cart to explain the wizarding currency to her, as Hagrid was in danger of spilling his guts at the time.

The second vault, number seven-hundred-and-thirteen, was almost empty when the goblin opened it. Hallie was surprised to see Hagrid tipsily walk in, grab a small paper-wrapped package, and shove it into one of his many pockets. He refused to explain at her questioning glance, and actually changed the subject to the dragons guarding the bank. Hallie had pushed her curiosity aside for the time being, and listened as Hagrid described dragons with an almost yearning gleam in his eyes.

After exiting Gringotts, Hagrid led Hallie into the different shops in Diagon Alley. They picked up several books on her supply list in Flourish and Blotts, and a cauldron and potion ingredients in the Apothecary.

At one point, they passed the alley where Hallie had met Remus. She noticed a crooked sign that read *Knockturn Alley* nailed to a post.

Broaching the subject carefully, Hallie had asked Hagrid about it. His response was similar to Remus's when he told her in no uncertain terms to stay away. According to the giant, Knockturn Alley was a place mostly inhabited by dark wizards. The shops down there sold usually illegal artifacts that could be quite deadly. It was nothing she needed to concern herself with.

Hallie felt rather miffed at being treated like a child but conceded that she had no wish to explore the alley anyway. She didn't want to end up running into that hag again.

Hagrid decided to take her to Madam Malkin's next to pick up her school robes. Just as they were about to enter the shop, Hallie saw something through the glass window that made her freeze.

Standing up on a stool inside was Draco Malfoy, with an utterly bored expression on his face. He was watching with a regal air as a flustered young woman ran around taking his measurements. He sneered in disgust as the girl, who was obviously new, tripped over the roll of fabric she was carrying.

Back outside, Hallie made a hasty decision to stall. She would much rather avoid another confrontation with the stuck up wizard. She doubted he would be much more pleasant this time around, even if she did look like Harry Potter... Actually, that was even more reason to steer clear of him.

"Harry, what are yeh doin'?" Hagrid looked confused as he held open the door, one foot already inside.

"Um," Hallie thought quickly. Looking up and down the street, she noticed a *Magical Menagerie*. "Oh! I just remembered, Hagrid! I have to pick up some stuff for my cat!"

He looked down at the tiny feline on the ground as though just noticing it. Frowning, he asked, "Well, we can jus' get whatever yeh need later-"

"No!" Hallie blurted out. "Uh, we should probably get it now... Before I forget! And the poor thing is probably starving by now- Right?" she rounded on the clueless cat.

Suddenly the object of much staring, the cat looked up. For a moment it glanced between the two humans, Hagrid's oblivious face, and Hallie's pleading eyes. Giving a very out of place shrug, it meowed toward Hallie.

"Well, alrigh' then," Hagrid said, scratching his head.

Hallie sighed in relief and grabbed Hagrid's huge hand, tugging him away from the clothing store. They stepped into the menagerie, and Hallie searched for what she would need. She ended up grabbing a

pet carrier that was magically expanded on the inside, a bag of fish treats, and an adjusting satin collar that came in scarlet with a silver bell attached. Hopefully, the tinkling charm would keep her new pet from sneaking up on her. She didn't want any more surprises. It was practically his fault that she'd fallen on Malfoy in the first place.

Hallie was actually enjoying this part of the shopping trip, as she got to look at all the animals inside as she found her purchases. There were a variety of creatures, ranging from dogs with forked tails similar to her cat's, to giant orange toads with six eyes. There were also fluffy, custard colored things called Puffskeins that hummed as she walked by. The animals there were anything but ordinary. As she was scanning the snake tanks, she even thought she heard two of them conversing.

*'Now that's something you don't see everyday,'* she thought, watching them argue. She would have suspected the irritable viper of having PMS if it didn't complain very loudly about its monthly shedding. Hallie was surprised none of the other customers stopped to listen as well. *'I guess they're used to this sort of thing.'*

As the witch at the counter calculated her total, Hallie observed a cage of sleek black rats nearby. They seemed to be playing a game of jump rope with their tails...

Also drawing her attention was a bandy-legged cat with ginger fur sitting upon the witch's shoulder. His oddly squashed face watched Hallie and her companion carefully. For a moment, the two cats seemed to lock gazes, silently assessing each other. The staring contest was broken when a door behind the counter opened, and a balding man with a sour expression ambled out, muttering expletives as he tried to balance a buzzing crate.

Hallie winced as she recognized him. He was the same man who'd been chasing her cat down the street. The animal on her shoulder also seemed to be familiar with him, as it immediately hopped into the plastic bags the witch handed Hallie, disappearing inside.

After the menagerie, Hallie allowed Hagrid to drop her off inside Madam Malkin's. She glanced around the shop nervously until she was reassured that Malfoy was gone. It wasn't hard to notice the

general lift in atmosphere with the loss of his presence. The poor assistant certainly seemed happier. Hagrid left her to the manager, saying he had to grab something next door. Hallie acquiesced, and climbed on a stool to be pinned and measured. It was a bit disconcerting to realize that none of her clothes would fit in her natural appearance. Of course, seeing the boys' uniform being brought over, that probably wouldn't matter.

As Hallie was leaving, she struggled to hang onto all of her shopping bags. She had asked Hagrid earlier if he could use magic to make them lighter or something, but he'd started blushing and muttered something about not being allowed. She'd also seen him clutch a frilly pink umbrella behind his back, but Hallie wasn't sure she even wanted to know what he was doing with that.

She spotted Hagrid waiting nearby, not that it was hard with his size. As Hallie greeted him, she was surprised to see a large metal cage at his feet.

"What's that?" she asked.

Hagrid lifted it up for her to see, a strange smile on his face. "Happy Birthday, Harry!"

Hallie gasped. Her birthday had actually passed a few weeks ago, without her notice. She never did pay much attention to the celebratory day since it was usually spent doing chores and listening to Dudley's taunts.

"Wow, Hagrid. I- thanks. I couldn't possibly-" she stumbled, at a loss for words as she examined the cage. Inside was a magnificent bird, a snowy owl to be exact. She had never seen one close up, but this one was beautiful. She had completely white feathers with specks of black, and two amber eyes stared curiously at Hallie.

"Ah, it's nothin'," Hagrid blushed, pleased that she liked it. "Owls are dead useful, though. Carry yer mail and ev'rythin'."

Hallie thanked Hagrid profusely, her eyes slightly moist. She couldn't stop smiling, something the giant noticed. That was the first real

present she had ever received, not counting a pair of Vernon's socks and one of Petunia's old cooking aprons.

The owl hooted gently as they continued down the street. She seemed nice enough for a wild bird. Hagrid did mention that owls were rather intelligent, though. Hallie thought it was a good thing she was so calm, especially when the cat poked his head out of a bag to stare at her. The owl only squawked once at the furry appendage.

Their last stop was Ollivander's, where Hallie would finally get a magic wand. She could barely contain her excitement as they entered the musty shop. Finally, a real wand!

The lighting inside was poor, and the place looked deserted. Hagrid sat down on a rickety chair in the corner, and Hallie placed all her bags around on the floor next to him, including her new owl's cage. She stared around at the shelves stocked with slim, nondescript boxes. Hallie was about to ask if they should come back later when an old man with strangely pale blue eyes stepped out of the shadows.

"Hello there... *Harry Potter*," he said in a quiet voice. The way he paused before her name made Hallie wonder if he knew something. There was also the way his watchful eyes drifted over her, not exactly seeing her, and yet taking everything in. Could he see past her glamour...?

"I've been expecting you," Ollivander continued, silvery eyes now glued to her scar. He reached out a spidery finger, ignoring Hallie's flinch, and tapped the lightning bolt. He sighed with regret, "I'm sorry to say I sold the wand that did it. Thirteen-and-a-half-inches. Yew. Powerful wand, very powerful, and in the wrong hands..." he started to drift, and Hallie coughed lightly to get his attention.

"Oh, yes! Now, Mr. Potter, let's see what we can do for you."

He pulled out a measuring tape and asked her for her wand hand. Hallie just shrugged and held up her right. The tape measure began zooming around her by itself, taking account of every inch of her body, from the width of her eyes to the length of her feet. Hallie had no idea what the space between her nostrils had to do with a wand, but she wasn't going to say anything. As the tape measure went about its

work, Ollivander was speaking, rattling off the different types of wands he sold. He mentioned the exact length and core of both her parents' wands as well, showing his perfect memory.

He finally snapped at the measure to stop, and began pulling down boxes. He told her that it was the wand that chooses the wizard, and Hallie found herself hoping one actually picked her. What if the wands didn't like her? Would they just decide she was a lost cause, and send her back to the Dursleys?

As time passed, and the pile of discarded wands grew, Hallie began to fear that was a very real possibility. Where there had once been a hundred boxes taking up the walls from floor to ceiling, there were now less than five. The hardwood floor was literally buried under small piles of wands. Hagrid was dead asleep and snoring in his chair. Her cat had made an appearance as well for a short while before settling down for a nap on Hagrid's rising and falling chest.

Hallie snorted as another wand was snatched from her limp hand, this time maple with unicorn hair. While she was becoming more discouraged, Ollivander looked ready to wet himself with excitement. The old man was practically humming as he ran around pulling down more wands. When asked about his buoyancy, he said it was nice to have a challenge. Hallie privately thought he was off his rocker.

"Ah... how about this one? Unusual combination- holly and phoenix feather, eleven inches, nice and supple."

Ollivander handed her another wand, but this one had a slightly different feel to it. He watched her fingers wrap around the wood, an eager expression on his face.

The second she touched it, Hallie knew she had found the wand for her. The wood felt warm under her palm, and a tingle spread up her arm. She twirled it over her head, and fought back a squeal of glee as she was showered with red and gold sparks.

Ollivander wasn't as reserved.

"Yes! Oh, bravo!" He hopped up once, hands clapped together, and a smug expression on his face. After a moment, he calmed down, face going contemplative. "Hmm, curious..."

Hallie felt the air go out of her sails faster than breakfast at the Dursleys. Why did she have the feeling she about to receive more bad news? She felt the same nervousness that had accompanied Dumbledore's comments.

"Um, what's curious?" she asked, deciding to get it over with.

Ollivander fixed Hallie with a piercing stare. "I remember every wand I've ever sold, Mr. Potter. It just so happens that the phoenix whose tail feather resides in your wand, gave another. It is very curious indeed that you should be destined for this wand... when its brother gave you that scar."

Hallie felt her mouth fall open in shock as she listened. *'My wand is related to Voldemort's? That can't be good...'*

"Yes," Ollivander added, "curious how these things happen. The wand chooses the wizard, Mr. Potter, remember that. I think we can expect great things from you... After all, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named did great things- terrible, but great."

As Hallie stood, slightly horrified, and holding her wand at a distance, Hagrid gave an almighty snore. As he leaned further in his chair, the two back legs creaked under the pressure and finally snapped. The huge man went crashing to the floor, and awakened with a yelp. The cat on his chest hissed and jumped several feet in surprise.

Ollivander stared at the mess with pursed lips as Hagrid picked himself up. He grinned embarrassedly, "Hehe, sorry 'bout that..."

Hallie rolled her eyes. *'This day just keeps getting better all the time.'*

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Later that night, Hallie sat on a soft, four-poster bed, sorting through her shopping bags and placing things in her trunk. She and Hagrid had finished their shopping at Diagon Alley hours ago, and Floo-ed back into the headmaster's office. After saying good-bye to the man,



and promising to visit for tea, Hallie had been shown to the guest quarters. Dumbledore had summoned a tiny green person, dressed a white tea towel with the Hogwarts emblem, to show her the way. When asked, it introduced itself as Tizzy the house elf. Apparently, there were hundreds of these creatures in the school, cooking the meals, cleaning the dormitories, and keeping up with the general maintenance.

The rooms Hallie were currently staying in consisted of a small bedroom, bathroom, and an open area with a two-seater couch and a fireplace. It wasn't big at all, but compared to the cupboard under the stairs, it was heaven. Dumbledore had told her she would be living in the castle until school started, as there wasn't any point in going back to Surrey for the last few days. What he neglected to say, was that there wasn't any point getting her aunt and uncle railed up yet.

Until September first, Hallie was free to explore the castle to her heart's content, as long as she stayed away from the third floor corridor and the forest outside. The reason for the latter, was that it was full of dangerous creatures, including, but not limited to, werewolves, centaurs, and acromantulas. She hadn't even known half of those existed, but she wasn't eager to find out. As for the forbidden corridor, Dumbledore claimed it was undergoing renovation and off-limits to students that year. Hallie didn't believe him for a second.

So now the young girl-turned-boy was sitting quietly in her room, trying to fit all of her supplies into the trunk she'd bought. She might have had better luck if Hagrid had let her buy the self-expanding trunk with seven compartments. It had looked really cool! But, sadly, the man had wanted her to conserve her vault money for the next several years at Hogwarts. It made sense, even if Hallie didn't like it.

There was also a large amount of hideous clothing stashed in her cauldron, all once belonging to Dudley. McGonagall had made a short trip over to Privet Drive for her things while they were gone. The Dursleys had not put up much of a fight after she gave Dudley a pig's tail.

*'If only I could have seen that!'* Hallie thought wistfully.

Her aunt had just shoved a box of Hallie's 'possessions' into the witch's arms, and told her to vacate the property before she called the police. It was obvious to Hallie that no one had thought to take a peak inside the box, or what they found would have had them quite upset. All that Hallie had owned prior to that day, were some crayon doodles that she'd hung on the door of her cupboard, a teddy bear missing one eye and stuffed with newspaper after her cousin ripped out the cotton, and the rags she had been forced to wear since she was six.

Lifting up an enormous gray t-shirt, Hallie sighed, *'Well, at least I don't have worry about my clothes being the wrong gender anymore...'*

"Meow!"

Hallie dropped the shirt in her hands, startled. She'd almost forgotten about the cat. He had followed her into her rooms and settled himself on the floor, purring after the house elf had summoned a bowl of cream. Her new owl was up in the school owlry, preferring to stay somewhere more open.

The sleek black cat leapt onto Hallie's lap, demanding attention. He paced across her legs, tiny claws pulling at her jeans as he got comfortable.

Hallie frowned as she looked over the small creature, "I suppose if I'm going to keep you, I might as well give you a name..."

She thought about his appearance, trying to come up with something that would fit the cat... Although, as she took in the slightly demonic-looking tail, she wondered if he was even a cat. Olive green eyes watched her intently, before cycling through various shades of blue, yellow, and back to green.

*'Hmm,' Hallie mused, 'can't forget those, too. Definitely not normal cat behavior.'*

"How about... er..." Hallie thought back to her many visits with Mrs. Figg. The batty old woman had volunteered to babysit her every time the Dursleys needed to go somewhere, and were too afraid to leave Hallie alone, lest she blow up the house.

*'Then again, if magic is real, I probably could have done that...'*

Mrs. Figg had kept an entire house full of cats, forcing Hallie to look through old photos of every one to pass the time. One of their names had to work for her own cat.

"How about Muffin?" Hallie asked, directing her question toward her lap.

The cat gave her a blank stare in return.

"Okay, not that. Um... Max? Nah, too over-used. Salem? Too cliché. What about Mr. Tinkles?"

The cat's expression could only be summed up as incredulous.

Hallie laughed, "Is that a no? Come on, Mr. Tinkles is a very regal name-"

The claws dug deeper, just pricking her legs.

"Ow! Okay, okay, I get it..." Hallie controlled her giggles and looked him over again. Well, she could always name him according to his color. Unfortunately, his eyes never stayed the same, and she wasn't stupid enough to dare suggest 'Rainbow.' The only other color on him was black.

"Hey, I know!"

The cat gave her a sceptical glare. Hallie was starting to wonder if he was abnormally clever, or she was only seeing things.

"I'll call you... *Sable*."

---

Wake up!"

Hallie groaned as she felt another jab into her side. A high-pitched voice followed, dragging her from a pleasant sleep.

"Harry Potter needs to be waking up!"

Hallie rolled over tiredly, her eyes blinking open. She looked upward, taking in the sight of a frazzled house elf at her side. Seeing its charge was finally up, the tiny house elf placed down a steaming tray of food on the bedside table, before disappearing with a pop.

The girl sat up wearily, already mourning the end of one of the best nights of sleep she'd ever had. Lying on an actual bed made a real difference. It was too bad her vacation was over, though. That's right; it was finally September 1st, and time for 'Harry Potter' to make an appearance. It was only 7 A.M., and the students weren't to arrive until nightfall. However, in a another brilliant show of manipulation, the headmaster had suggested Hallie ride the train with all the other students. He claimed it was the only way to keep from attracting unwanted attention. Hallie thought that was kind of pointless after the scene in Diagon Alley. The wizarding world was already buzzing with news about the first sighting of the Boy-Who-Lived.

Sliding out from under the covers, Hallie stretched. Reaching up, she adjusted the invisible chain around her throat that had gotten twisted in her sleep. She sat back down on the bed with a small thump, and Sable gave an irritate yawn from her pillow before getting comfortable again. As Hallie gratefully took up a cup of coffee, she glared at the tiny furball, "You are so lucky."

After eating breakfast, which was such a lovely change from the table scraps at the Dursleys', Hallie decided to take a quick shower before putting on her school uniform.

Washing was certainly... *different* than it used to be. For one thing, her body no longer looked like her own, thanks to the glamour. For another, it was rather strange to wash her hair without being able to feel it; it was at least a foot shorter. Afterwards, she left the bathroom, a towel wrapped around her chest, regardless of her gender switch, and started digging through her trunk for her new clothes.

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Hallie stared into the vanity in her the bedroom, finishing up the last touches of her uniform. It consisted of black robes, a stiff white shirt, and black *pants*, rather than the skirt she should have worn.

*'Wouldn't do for the Boy-Who-Lived to be caught in that,'* she giggled at the thought.

Poking out her tongue in concentration, Hallie tightened her blank tie (It would gain color once she was sorted). She had never known putting on a tie could be so difficult. Hadn't wizards ever heard of a clip-on?

At last, she looked up, satisfied that there was nothing left to do. Then she saw her head, or more specifically, her hair. The short, ebony locks stuck out in every direction, bearing a strong resemblance to a victim of electrocution.

Eyeing the spiky mess in disgust, Hallie blurted out, "I look like a bloody hedgehog!"

The mirror tittered sympathetically, causing Hallie to jump back in shock. Calming down, Hallie rolled her eyes and walked away from the magical vanity.

*'I hate when they do that...'*

---

Hallie wandered around her rooms, searching for any items she may have left lying about. She didn't want to forget something important, and have to run down there on the first day of classes to retrieve it. She nodded in satisfaction when she realized all her possessions were taken care of. Tucking away the last of her textbooks, Hallie shut her trunk. Or at least, she tried to. Hallie finally resorted to sitting on it as she snapped the latch shut.

The only thing left was her wand, which Hallie had deliberately left unpacked. She figured it would make more sense to carry it on her. What use was her magic if she had to go digging through a trunk to use it?

The slim piece of wood rested innocently on a table, taunting her with its mere presence. Hallie still recalled the words of Mr. Ollivander a few days ago... To think, she had a wand related to the very monster that had murdered her parents. Did she really want to carry that around? But then Hallie remembered the other thing Ollivander had said.

*'The wand chooses the wizard.'*

Okay, technically, she was a witch pretending to be a wizard... but if it was true that the wand knew exactly who it belonged to, then didn't that mean she was meant to have it? No matter that it shared a core with Voldemort's wand, it had still picked her as its owner. The one who had defeated the dark lord, given the brother of the tool he had used during his reign of terror. Maybe it was destiny...

Hallie snorted, *'Destiny? Okay, now I know I'm losing it. No more caffeine for me... I really need to get going anyway. Don't want to miss the stupid train.'*

Silently chiding herself, Hallie grabbed her wand, sliding it up the sleeve of her robes for safe-keeping. She then grabbed one end of her trunk and began dragging the heavy luggage toward the door to her rooms.

A tinkling sound behind her alerted Hallie to the approach of her cat. She smirked slightly. She had known it was a good idea to get him that collar. Sable had seemed a little disgruntled when it was first placed on, especially since he couldn't remove it no matter how hard he struggled. Since then, he had not once been successful in sneaking up on her.

The black cat hurried to catch up with Hallie, bounding onto her shoulder in one leap. It was fast becoming his favorite place to be whenever Hallie had to go somewhere. Smiling as he purred, she reached the back of the portrait closing off her rooms.

Just as the frame swung open, Hallie took a deep breath and released it. She stepped into the hall with a look of determination.

"Okay, let's do this."

---

Hallie pushed her trolley through King's Cross station, keeping her eyes open for the platform. The place was crowded with Muggles, and she worried she would miss it. After all, she was supposed to be looking for a *wall*.

Dumbledore had explained it all to Hallie once she reached his office. He had given her directions to find the hidden platform as she would be going alone. The reason for this being that Hagrid would have certainly called attention, and the rest of the staff was too busy preparing for the welcome feast. Then the headmaster had tapped an old teacup and said, '*Portus*.' He called his creation a 'Portkey,' and the second Hallie touched it, she found herself spinning through the air, her hand glued to the cup, only to come crashing down in the empty parking lot outside the train station in London. It was a good thing the lot had been vacant when she arrived. Hallie must have been a sight to see, sprawled on the pavement, and trying to remove her trunk from where it was pinning her legs, while her cat was hissing up a storm from inside his carrier.

Now Hallie was searching for Platform 9 3/4. Apparently, she was to locate platforms nine and ten, then walk through the wall in between them. When Dumbledore explained that part, Hallie had given him an doubtful look. He wanted her to run into a brick wall? *Right...* Then again, she figured she couldn't complain after already experiencing travel by fireplace, and now delicate china. That cup was still lying in pieces outside. Hallie hoped Dumbledore wasn't expecting it back.

*'There it is!'* Hallie realized, spotting the barrier. It didn't look out of the ordinary, but she supposed that was the point. *'Now I just have to go through it...'*

Hallie faced the brick wall nervously, lining up her trolley, and preparing her stance. She glanced around to make sure none of the muggles were watching. Seeing the coast was clear, she pushed forward. She set off at a jog at first, and then gained speed as the wall came closer. Only seconds before impact, Hallie closed her eyes.

*'I'm going to crash!'*

Luckily, that didn't happen, as when Hallie was brave enough to open her eyes again, she found herself still running, but about to hit several people in robes instead. Swerving out of the way, Hallie halted her trolley, panting slightly from the effort. That thing was heavy! Sable meowed in annoyance from where his carrier was tied on top of her trunk.

Sighing in relief, Hallie decided to look around. She found herself slightly awed by the enchanted platform. It was full of wizards and wizards, plus what looked like a few Muggle parents, all seeing their children off. She felt a brief pang of jealousy as she watched a red-headed woman smothering her son. He was blushing furiously and trying to escape her clutches while his twin brothers snickered at his expense. A couple other kids were gathered around them, all bearing a familial resemblance. Hallie tried not to stare as she made her way toward the train.

The Hogwarts Express was an old-fashioned steam engine, although Hallie was sure it ran on more magic than coal. The huge locomotive was a rich scarlet color. Dozens of clear windows faced the platform and showed the students inside, meeting up with their friends, or waving to their parents. Walking further down the train, Hallie searched for an empty compartment, not comfortable intruding on anyone.

She finally spotted one near the end and climbed inside. However, once she was standing in the compartment, she wondered how she was going to get her trunk in as well. Crouching down, she grabbed the handle and tugged. Big mistake. She had barely heaved before the weight of the trunk pulled her right back down. Glaring at the two foot distance between the floor of the train and the ground, Hallie jumped out. This time, she tried to lift her trunk on its side and push up. It was working slightly until the strain on her arms increased, forcing her to drop the trunk before it fell on her.

"Need any help, mate?"

Hallie startled, completely forgetting that she was barely holding up the heavy trunk. It was only the quick actions of a boy a few years



older than her, with bright red hair and freckles, that kept her from becoming the 'Boy-Who-Lived-Only-To-Be-Flattened.'

Smiling gratefully at him, she turned around and found his exact double staring at her with a mischievous grin. It was the two twins she'd seen.

"Like I was saying-" the boy asked.

"Need any help?" his copy finished.

Hallie shrugged sheepishly and gestured to her stuff, "Yeah, I'd appreciated it."

---

Hallie leaned back in her seat after releasing Sable. The cat shot out of his cage once he was free, only to take a place on one of the empty seats in the compartment. Meanwhile, Hallie stared out the window, waiting for the train to depart.

The twins had helped her carry her trunk inside, as well as putting it up in the luggage rack. They then carried on a rather stilted conversation with her, each one finishing the other's sentences. They had introduced themselves as Fred and George, although Hallie was hard-pressed to remember which twin was which. She gave them her name with some trepidation. To the twins' credit they only gaped at her forehead for a minute before shaking themselves out of a stupor. They shook hands with her, promising to talk again, and then hopped back out onto the platform.

Hallie could still spot them among the scattered people outside. It was hard to miss the cluster of red. She watched as Fred and George said good-bye to their mother, laughing at the disgruntled look on her face. Hallie couldn't hear exactly what was said, although she did catch the words 'toilet' and 'blown up.' Maybe she would ask later.

A tall boy with horn-rimmed glasses puffed out his chest before walking to the train. The boy Hallie's age ran off as well, looking relieved to get going. The twins soon followed, leaving just the woman and a little girl. The girl was waving tearily, and tried to chase

the train as it began moving. As they picked up speed, the Hogwarts Express turned a corner and the platform disappeared from sight.

Hallie yawned, leaning against the window. Without realizing it, her eyes slipped shut and she drifted off to sleep.

---

It was the low sound of the compartment door sliding open that woke Hallie a short while later.

"Hey, do you mind if I sit here?" The boy Hallie recognized from the platform pointed to the adjacent seat with uncertainty. He smiled a little nervously, "Everywhere else is full."

Rubbing her eyes, Hallie shrugged and nodded, "Sure, it's fine."

The two sat in silence for a few minutes. Hallie watched the countryside pass by outside. She felt the sensation of eyes boring into her and looked up. Her gaze met that of the boy, and he blinked before looking away embarrassedly. A moment later, he was at it again.

Getting a bit frustrated, Hallie looked up and asked, "Why are you staring at me like that?"

"Are you really Harry Potter?" the boy blurted out.

"Oh, him- I mean, yeah, that's me," Hallie laughed a bit to cover her slip up.

He didn't seem to notice, and continued with a trace of awe, "Wicked! So, do really have..." he pointed toward her forehead, "the *scar*?"

"Unfortunately," Hallie muttered, lifting up her bangs.

The boy exclaimed again, but seemed to notice her discomfort. Shaking himself, he said, "Sorry, I'm Ron Weasley." He held out his hand in greeting.

Hallie took it, smiling with humor, "Nice to meet you, Ron, though I suppose I don't have to introduce myself."

Ron chuckled, then said, "You know, you're not what I was expecting. I didn't actually believe Fred and George when they said they'd met Harry Potter. Thought they were having another go at me."

"They're your brothers, right?"

"Yeah." Ron scowled a bit, "Just two of them, though. I'm the youngest in our family, 'cept for my sister, Ginny."

"How many brothers and sisters do have?" Hallie asked curiously.

"Well," Ron seemed to be thinking about it, "There's Bill, the oldest, then Charlie. They both graduated Hogwarts already. Then there's Percy, and you've already met the twins. There's me, and lastly, Ginny. She'll be starting school next year."

"Wow, you're lucky to have so many siblings," Hallie said, but Ron seemed to disagree.

"Lucky?" He snorted. "Try living with five older brothers. I'm always getting their hand-me-downs, and no matter what I do, I'll never be able to make a name for myself, because they've already done it. Bill was Head Boy, Charlie a fantastic Seeker, Percy's a new Prefect, and the twins are super popular pranksters. My whole family's been in Gryffindor, and I can only hope I make it there, too." At the end of his rant, Ron seemed to realize just how much he had said to a perfect stranger, and stopped talking.

"At least you have a family that cares about you," Hallie pointed out softly. Ron finally looked up and frowned. "I've lived my aunt and uncle all my life, and they can't stand me and my-" Hallie held up her hands and made quoting motions "-freakishness." She laughed at that, "Of course, now I actually know I have magic, so I suppose they were right.

"And you want to talk about living up to something," Hallie huffed, "I've only just learned that all this is real, and I've already got a whole bunch of people bowing and scraping every time they see the bloody mark on my forehead-" Hallie cut herself off, and gave Ron an apologetic look, "Er, no offense."

"None taken," Ron said. He watched her for a moment before smiling brightly, "Well, then, I guess we'll both have to make something of ourselves."

Hallie smiled back. It seemed she had found her first real friend in the wizarding world. "I guess so."

---

Draco pushed past another student in the corridor, sneering as the sandy-haired boy tried to protest. Draco's two friends, although 'lackeys' was perhaps a better term, followed him. Crabbe and Goyle lumbered after mindlessly, not speaking or even questioning their destination, only taking orders as their parents had taught them to.

It had been a hasty decision on Draco's part to leave the compartment and wander the train, but he had seen Pansy Parkinson on the platform, and was taking no chances. She could be easily avoided if he kept moving.

He had arrived at the platform at exactly ten minutes before the train was scheduled to leave. As his father had said, 'A Malfoy is always on time, never too early, and certainly not late.' As soon as their chauffeur had dropped them off, Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy led their son through the barrier, and sent him off with a very proper and public farewell. His mother had told him to study hard, and she would see him at Christmas. His father had told Draco to make the proper alliances, and stay out of trouble. Neither had mentioned a thing about having fun that year, a typical trait of his parents. He sometimes found himself wishing they would treat him more like a son than an heir, but then he would chastise himself for having such weak thoughts. He was a proud pureblood with no need to be coddled!

Scowling at himself, Draco continued to move past the other compartments, only sparing a glance at some. He wondered how many of his parents' acquaintances had sent their children to Hogwarts. Some were of the same mind as Lucius that Durmstrang would be a better choice.

Passing by an open compartment full of third year Hufflepuffs, Draco caught a snatch of conversation.

"That's right, he's here-"

"Harry Potter?"

"Did you see him?"

"-scrawny thing-"

"-black hair, green eyes-"

"-saw him get in the back-"

Draco's blue-gray eyes lit up with interest, but he forced himself not to linger. So, Potter was here? Then this was the perfect opportunity for Draco to meet the boy. After all, Potter would need someone to introduce him to the wizarding world. If the rumors were true, then the boy grew up with *Muggles*, of all things. Draco shuddered in disgust. Hopefully, the boy wouldn't be a completely lost cause.

His thoughts were interrupted when a dumpy-looking witch intercepted him, pushing a cart full of magical sweets.

"Anything off the trolley, dears?" she asked in one of those typically grandmother voices.

Draco's lip curled and he quickly bypassed her. Crabbe and Goyle, however, only spared their leader a single look before diving into the witch's cart. When it came to food, nothing could stand in the way of their stomachs, not even Draco Malfoy.

Sighing hopelessly, the blonde continued on his own, knowing the other two would catch up as soon as they'd eaten themselves sick. He didn't see the point of consuming so much sugar. It would only rot your teeth. Anyway, the young Malfoy hadn't been allowed any candy since an incident on his seventh birthday, involving his Great Aunt Wendolyn, and a pack of Fizzing Whizbees. Draco had taken a quick liking to the treats, eating enough to leave him as hyper as a house elf on Butterbeer. It was an absolute embarrassment for his father, and Draco had been severely punished.

The sound of soft laughter further down the train piqued Draco's curiosity. He continued on until he found the source. Inside, a pair of first years were sorting through a dangerous amount of candy, stopping to examine certain objects. They must have been Muggleborns to get so excited. Draco was ready to move on in disinterest, when he caught sight of a small boy with atrocious hair and clothes that looked at least three sizes too large for him.

The boy was opening a small, pentagonal-shaped box and peering inside warily. He jumped back into his seat when a Chocolate Frog bounded out of the package. His friend started cracking up at the look on the boy's face.

"What the bloody hell was that?" the scruffy boy exclaimed.

"It was just a Chocolate Frog, Harry! You're supposed to take a bite out of them," the other boy demonstrated by taking a large chunk out of his own frog as its legs kicked in feeble protest.

"Ron, that's disgusting..."

Draco's eyes widened. That must be Potter! It would explain why he was so clueless. But who was that other kid? Judging by the state of his robes, Draco could already tell he wasn't anyone worth notice. However, he was infringing on Draco's plans. No, this would not do at all.

Without so much as knocking, Draco shoved open the sliding door, and stepped inside, a superior smirk on his face. Schooling himself, he leaned coolly against the door, arms crossed, and spoke in a drawl he had often heard his father use.

"They're saying all down the train that Harry Potter has come to Hogwarts. So, it's you, isn't it?"

The dark-haired boy looked up in surprise when Draco spoke, and for a moment, he seemed to freeze. Looking into the boy's startling emerald eyes, Draco watched as a trace of annoyance trickled into his expression. The glare directed towards him seemed familiar... But that couldn't be possible. Shaking it off as nonsense, Draco continued.

---

Hallie was having a marvelous time talking with Ron. He'd told her all about his family, going on to describe what his older brothers did for a living. Charlie worked with dragons in Romania, and Bill got to visit cursed tombs in Egypt. She just couldn't believe some of the things that existed in the wizarding world.

Ron also introduced her to his pet rat, Scabbers. He said it used to belong to his brother, Percy, and was bloody useless. Hallie had to agree seeing as Scabbers hadn't done much the entire ride except sleep. She had in turn mentioned her cat, who had slipped off at some point and had yet to return. Hallie also told him about her owl, Hedwig, who was already up at the school. She wasn't sure if students were allowed to have more than one pet, but she doubted Ron would say anything.

At one point, a witch with a cart of sweets had stopped by. Ron had seemed to deflate as he shyly pulled out a packet of slightly squashed sandwiches instead. Recognizing the problem immediately, Hallie made a quick decision. She had plenty of money herself, and what better way to spend it than with a friend? Pulling out a handful of galleons and sickles, Hallie told the witch that they would take the lot.

Ron had tried to decline on Hallie's offer to share until she shoved a handful of the foreign treats in his lap and asked for one of his mum's sandwiches as a trade. He didn't feel quite as awkward afterwards, although Hallie didn't bother to mention that she detested corned beef just as much as he did.

They were having a brilliant time daring each other to try the Bertie Botts, when Hallie lost hold of her Chocolate Frog. Listening to Ron's teasing, Hallie had been caught off guard when the compartment door slid open, and a boy she remembered all too well stepped in. If it weren't for the fact that no one knew she was actually a girl, Hallie would think that Draco Malfoy was stalking her. She just had the worst luck sometimes.

Trying to hold back her anger, Hallie answered his query in a tight voice, "Yeah, that's me."

The blonde nodded and stepped forward with his hand outstretched, but Hallie didn't take it. "My name's Malfoy, Draco Malfoy."

A snort from Ron drew his attention off Hallie for the moment. Malfoy dropped his hand and glared at the other boy. "Think my name's funny, do you? No need to ask who you are." He sneered looking him over, "Red hair, freckles, and a hand-me-down robe. You must be a Weasley."

Ron stood up abruptly, ears flaming red, and fists clenched at his sides. Malfoy didn't seem the least bit troubled, and ignored the boy, speaking to Hallie instead.

"Eventually, you'll learn that some wizarding families are better than others. You don't want to be seen consorting with blood traitors, after all. The Weasleys are an absolute disgrace to pureblood society. You don't want to go making friends with the wrong sort." Holding out his hand once more, he said, "I can help you there."

Hallie looked between Malfoy and Ron. The blonde was simply standing with a look of anticipation on his face. Ron was still the color of his hair, but as the silence stretched, his spirits seemed to fall. It was obvious the boy didn't believe he had a chance with the famous Harry Potter.

Taking one last glance at Ron, Hallie stepped forward, her expression blank. She held up her own hand as though to take Malfoy's when she pretended to hesitate, then dropped it.

"You know," she said with a thoughtful air, "I think I can tell the wrong sort for myself. Thanks anyway for the offer, Malfoy."

Malfoy stiffened in obvious shock before he scowled darkly. His cheeks were tinged a light pink with embarrassment, and his eyes iced over. "Have it your way, Potter," he spat. "But I'd be careful if I were you. Unless you're a bit more polite, you'll go the same way as your parents. They didn't know what was good for them, either."

"Is that a threat, Malfoy?" Hallie asked in a steady voice, but the paleness of her face belied her feelings. She walked another step



forward, getting up in his face. Malfoy moved backward, almost unconsciously, keeping his distance as Hallie came closer.

When she had pushed him back into the corridor, Hallie stopped, her quiet voice sounding loud and clear. "I'll have you know, that I don't take well to threats. You should remember that, Malfoy..."

Suddenly, she dropped her dangerous front, and smiled, "Alright then, see you at school!" With that, she slammed the door to the compartment in Draco Malfoy's stunned face, turning the lock as well. Hallie walked back to her seat as though nothing had happened, and turned to her gaping friend.

"Now, where were we?" she asked, picking up the card that had fallen from her Chocolate Frog box. She glanced at it, then turned to look at Ron, before doing a double take. "Whoa! Did that picture just move?"

---

"Okay, now let me see if I have this right..." Hallie paused to take another lick of her Sugar Quill. "So, Gryffindor is for the brave, Hufflepuffs are total pushovers, Ravenclaws are bookworms, and Slytherins are basically evil incarnate?"

"Thash righ'," Ron nodded with his mouth full of pumpkin pasty. Swallowing he elaborated on the last one, "Every witch or wizard to come out of Slytherin went dark. They say, even You-Know-Who was in that house!"

"Voldemort?" Hallie gasped.

Ron choked, "Don't say his name!"

"Er, sorry." Hallie frowned, wondering if everyone was that skittish of the Dark Lord's name. She was also worried about the revelation that Voldemort had been at Hogwarts once. It made sense if she thought about it, but now she was positive that Slytherin was the last place she wanted to be. Thinking back to the wand hidden up her sleeve, Hallie knew she didn't need another reason to compare herself to him.

Ron spoke a bit more about the houses, specifically Gryffindor. He'd mentioned that his entire family went there. He was hoping to be sent there as well, although he figured Hufflepuff was a possibility, and one he was not looking forward to.

"Fred and George would never let me live it down!"

The thought of going into Gryffindor with Ron wasn't so bad. He was of the opinion that the Boy-Who-Lived could go nowhere else. Hallie didn't think the others Houses sounded too bad. Ravenclaw may be for the more studious, but she could probably fit right in if she applied herself. Ron seemed dubious, but Hallie thought his views might be a little skewed. Not everything was as black and white as all that. In the same sense, not all eleven-year-olds could be divided by just four traits.

"Hey, Ron?" Hallie asked, just realizing something.

"Yeah?"

"How exactly do they sort us?"

Ron gulped, looking uncharacteristically wary. "Well, Fred and George told me you have fight a troll..."

Hallie laughed, causing Ron to give her a disgruntled look. "What's so funny? We've got to take on a fully grown mountain when we get to school, and we don't even know any magic yet!"

"Ron, I think your brothers were just trying to get you riled up again. Really, a troll? I doubt even Dumbledore could expect us to do something that dangerous. How would we beat it, with a Levitation Charm? Tell you what Ron, I'll distract it, and you can aim."

Ron joined in with Hallie's amusement that time. He had to admit that it did sound a little farfetched.

"I guess you're right, Harry. How would that help sort us anyway?"

"Well," Hallie said in a serious tone, "I suppose if you beat the troll, you go into Gryffindor. Knock it out, and you're a shoe in for

Ravenclaw. Stab it in the back, and Slytherin would be the perfect place for you. And if you lose and get knocked unconscious instead, I'm sure the teachers will place you in Hufflepuff once you wake up-

Hallie couldn't complete her diatribe for both she and Ron were bent over in stitches that time.

"Excuse me?"

Hallie nearly fell out of her seat at the thought that Draco Malfoy could be back. The idea was quickly dispelled, though, for he would never be that polite. Instead, a girl with frizzy brown hair and honey-colored eyes was standing in the doorway, impatiently tapping her foot.

Turning her nose up at the hysterical boys, the girl asked, "Have either of you seen a toad? A boy named Neville has lost one."

"N-no," Ron managed to say, "We haven't seen any stupid toads."

The girl made a confirming sound and rolled her eyes at his lack of manners. As she glanced around the messy compartment cluttered with food wrappers, her gaze fell on Hallie. Catching sight of the lightning bolt scar under untidy black hair, the girl gasped.

"You're Harry Potter!"

Without invitation, the girl cleared off an empty seat and sat down, folding her skirt underneath her. "Hello, I'm Hermione Granger. I was ever so pleased when I got my Hogwarts letter. Nobody in my family has ever had any magic. I'm just so eager to get started. I've already learned all our course books by heart, and I picked up a few others for a bit of light reading. I've read all about you, you know. You're in *Modern Magical History*, *The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts*, and *Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century*."

She said all this very fast, not even pausing for breath. Hallie just stared at her wide-eyed and slightly dazed.

"Um, really? Huh, I didn't know that." It was another sign of just how famous the Boy-Who-Lived was if he was in several books. Hallie

really should take the time to read about herself, or Harry Potter, anyway.

"Goodness, I'd have found out everything I could if it was me," Hermione said.

Hallie held back from telling the girl exactly why she was so oblivious. It wasn't like she'd had any time to look up that sort of stuff. She was a little preoccupied after agreeing to be a boy for an undetermined length of time.

"Do either of you know what House you'll be in? I've been asking around and I hope I'm in Gryffindor. It sounds by far the best. I heard Dumbledore himself was in it, but I suppose Ravenclaw wouldn't be too bad, either. Anyway, I'd better go look for Neville's toad. You should really clean up, I expect we'll be arriving soon."

With that, Hermione Granger stood up, brushing herself off and walked out of the compartment, leaving two gaping students staring after her. Once she was gone, Ron exclaimed, "Whatever House I'm in, I hope she's not in it!"

---

Hermione was correct in saying that the train ride would end soon. A mere ten minutes later, the Hogwarts Express pulled into Hogsmeade Station. A cool voice rang throughout the compartments, telling students to exit the train, and leave their belongings to be brought up to the castle later. Hallie was grateful as she had no desire to try dragging her trunk all the way up the grounds.

She and Ron stepped onto the platform, caught in a wave of excited students. Hallie had panicked for a moment when she realized Sable was still missing. However, when Hagrid was directing the first years to climb into the waiting boats, he held up the disgruntled cat. Hallie ran forward to take him at the same time that a pudgy boy with brown hair yelled out the name 'Trevor' in obvious relief. Apparently, Sable had been busy, for there was a large green toad hanging docilely from his mouth.

After handing Neville his toad, she and Ron had chosen a boat, joined unfortunately, by the boy and Hermione Granger. Ron's

unhappy moans were soon drowned out, though, as the eager students caught their first sight of Hogwarts. Hallie had already seen it during her stay, but never had she gotten a true glimpse of the exterior, especially not at night. The castle loomed over the lake and surrounding forest, its windows twinkling like stars in the dark.

Beside Hallie, Ron whispered, "It's amazing..."

Looking up at what would be her new home, Hallie had to agree. "Yeah, it is."

---

Hallie glanced around nervously as the first years filed into the Great Hall. Hundreds of eyes stared back at them as McGonagall made her way towards a patched hat on a stool. Hallie squirmed uncomfortably, tugging at the necklace hidden under her black school robes. She knew Dumbledore's charm would not fail, but she couldn't help but be on edge. Up until now, it had been fairly easy to keep up appearances as the 'Boy-Who-Lived'. The question now, was how would she hold up under the constant attention of her peers?

The frayed hat began singing some off-key song about the four founders, but Hallie barely noticed, only making sure to clap with the others when it was done. Behind her, she heard Ron sigh in relief and mutter something about doing his brothers bodily harm. As McGonagall unrolled a long sheet of parchment and began calling names, Hallie had only one thought,

*'What have I gotten myself into?'*

"Abbott, Hannah."

The list went on, while Hallie struggled not to yell at the woman to hurry up. The Sorting Hat took its time, pausing to consider some students, such as Hermione Granger, and Neville Longbottom. Others were in the spotlight for less than a second. Draco Malfoy, Hallie curbed the sneer forming on her face, was declared a Slytherin almost immediately. The urge to roll her eyes couldn't be helped. He happened to notice as he walked past the line of fidgeting students. His arrogant smirk slipped for a moment as he glared openly at Hallie,

or rather, Harry Potter. Eyes flicking toward McGonagall for safety reasons, Hallie turned back and gave him a cheeky wave.

*'I wonder if it's just a coincidence that I piss him off in more than one identity?'* Hallie wondered absently, *'Nah, he's just a git.'*

Several names, and many exasperated sighs later, it was Hallie's turn.

"Potter, Harry."

*'Right, that's me...'*

It wasn't as hard as she thought to make that agonizing walk towards the stool... with the entire student body watching her every move... and whispering... and pointing... Hallie grit her teeth as she sat down. Okay, it was really annoying. But at least she'd gotten away from those damned twinkling eyes! The headmaster had been watching her suffer the entire time, seeming to take great amusement from it.

*'Barmy old codger...'* she thought.

"I couldn't agree more."

Hallie yelped as a scratchy voice answered, causing a few snickers to go around the hall.

Blushing underneath the oversized hat, she grumbled, *'Thanks a lot. Just hurry up and sort me.'*

"Impatient, aren't we?" The hat chuckled in her ears. It was kind of creepy. Hallie just growled in answer.

"Alright, no need to get snippy... Let's see... Hmm, plenty of courage, and not a bad mind either... Oh, and a thirst to prove yourself... So where shall I put you?"

*'Not Slytherin. Not Slytherin. Anything but Slytherin! Put me in Hufflepuff if you have to!'* she thought desperately, remembering Ron's advice on the houses. Hufflepuff wasn't the most dignified place to be, kind of pitiful actually... But anything was better than in the same House as Malfoy!

"Are you sure? You could be great, you know, and Slytherin would help you on your way to greatness... It's all here, in your head..."

*'No way! They already think I'm a boy, I don't need them thinking I'm the next Dark Lord, too! Please, get out of my head, and just sort me already!'*

"Hmph! Fine, well, if you're sure about Slytherin...?"

'YES!' Hallie felt the hat wince at her mental scream.

"Hmm... In that case, it had better be... GRYFFINDOR!"

The last word was shouted, and as McGonagall pulled off the hat, Hallie couldn't hear her own happy laugh over the tumultuous applause coming from the Gryffindor table. She grinned at the whistles and catcalls coming from the Weasley twins as they cheered, 'We got Potter! We got Potter!' Dumbledore beamed at her from the head table, his twinkle on full blast. Hagrid clapped loudly, and even McGonagall wore a discrete smile. As Hallie sat down to hearty thumps on the back, she told herself, *'Maybe this won't be so bad after all...'*

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The feast finally ended, and Percy Weasley led the sleepy students up to the Gryffindor Tower. The trip itself was far too long in Hallie's opinion, but it did give her time to think.

After her own sorting, she had watched the rest of the first years get sorted. Poor Ron had been near the very end of the line. By the time his name was called, his face was a nice shade of green with his freckles standing out sharply. He needn't have worried, though. The Sorting Hat took barely a minute before placing him in Gryffindor. The red-head had collapsed in a seat next to Hallie, and all his previous fears vanished once the food appeared.

Even after the mountain of candy the two had consumed, Ron was able to finish off third helpings, as well as dessert. Growing up on as little as she could scrounge up, Hallie was lucky to finish one plate full of the magnificent feast. It was persistence more than anything else that got her through to the chocolate pudding.

Once the tables had cleared, Dumbledore stood up to give his own announcements. He had mentioned that the forest was forbidden to all students, and his blue eyes drifted towards the Weasley twins there. Neither looked very affected by the warning. He had also said something about Quidditch trials, and a reminder from the caretaker about using magic in the halls. It was Dumbledore's parting words that caused the most reaction from the student body. He said that the third-floor corridor would be out of bounds that year to any who did not wish to die a very painful death. His solemn tone had spoken of his seriousness, although a few students did try to laugh. They were quick to shut up. Hallie had quietly snorted to herself, while thinking of the Headmaster's earlier insistence that the corridor was under maintenance.

*'So much for that...'*

At last, Percy called a halt to their procession. Craning her head to see over some girls in front of her, Hallie was able to see a large portrait as the top of the staircase. It was another moving painting, this one of an obese woman in a lurid pink gown. The gold plating on the frame proclaimed her 'The Fat Lady.'

*'How original.'*

"*Caput Draconis.*" The prefect spoke the password, and the painting swung forward to admit them. They climbed through the hole and into a large room decorated in red and gold. Percy finally directed the first years up two separate sets of stairs.

"C'mon, mate."

Hallie followed her new friend up the left staircase, her feet dragging as she covered up another yawn. She wanted nothing more than to fall into bed at that moment, exhausted from the day's events. She wasn't really focusing on her surroundings as Ron pushed open a door and dragged her inside. Three other boys were already stumbling towards their beds, their trunks already set out at the foot of each. Hallie found the one labeled 'H.J.P.' nearest the window and flopped down on the four-poster, still fully dressed. Her fuzzy mind barely registered that Sable must have been dropped off by a house



elf at some point. He watched her from his perch on the windowsill, as though waiting for something.

"G'night, Harry," Ron said, pulling shut the curtains on his bed. He had already changed into his pajamas while Hallie was simply drifting.

Nodding with her eyes still shut, Hallie stretched out on her red comforter, burrowing into the blankets. The room quieted down as the other boys settled down for the night. All was silent, and Hallie's breathing slowed, herself just seconds away from dreamland.

Suddenly, one of her eyes cracked open, the emerald lighting up as it caught the light of the moon outside. Her other eye followed suit, both staring off at the far wall. Ever so slowly, the pupils dilated, becoming two tiny pinpricks. Gasping, Hallie shot upward. Now wide awake, she stared around the dormitory in horror. She was in the boys' dormitory! Somehow, sleeping arrangements had completely slipped her mind...

*'I'm going to kill Dumbledore.'*

Sable watched his companion come to the realization. Finally, he curled up on one of her pillows, purring contently.

Hallie turned at the sound, and watched as the cat peeked open one golden eye. If she didn't know better, she would think he was laughing at her.

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Months passed as Hallie continued her schooling under the guise of the Boy-Who-Lived. It was stressful in the beginning, what with the way her classmates watched her every move... and the way some of her female classmates did so often left her seriously disturbed.

She spent a good deal of her time toying with the necklace, and nervously checking her reflection in every reflective surface she could find. By now, Hallie wouldn't be surprised if the other students thought her vain. She was always worried that she would slip up in some way, and people would learn she was a girl. It didn't help that she often forgot herself. There had been at least one horribly embarrassing incident where she would have walked into the girls' bathroom if someone hadn't pushed open the door at that exact moment, and nearly broken her nose in the process. At least they were too busy blushing and stuttering an apology to ask why she was there.

Other than that, she was coping. She'd gotten over the fact that she'd be sharing a dorm with a bunch of guys. It wasn't so bad after a while. As long as she remembered to get up early and change in the bathroom first, there were no awkward moments. It wasn't difficult when her dormmates were nearly impossible to wake in the morning. They slept like the dead, albeit a noisily snoring corpse, and left Hallie to the unfortunate task of getting them all to breakfast on time.

Classes themselves were going alright. Learning magic wasn't exactly what Hallie had been expecting, nor the majority of her fellow first years. As beginners, they had to start small, which meant little to no actual magic. Some teachers drilled nothing but theory into their pounding skulls before they were even allowed to lift a wand.

Learning from McGonagall and Flitwick were definitely the highlight of her days. She seemed to have a natural talent in Charms, but Transfiguration was equally fascinating. She was also taking Herbology in the greenhouses, and Astronomy on the tower at midnight. They were useful classes in their own right, she supposed, but nothing she found particularly interesting.

History of Magic was one of her least favorite places to be, although she did manage to catch up on any sleep she lost at night due to the guys. Professor Binns was dead, but he didn't let that deter him from sticking around to leave future generations ingrained with knowledge of every goblin war that ever existed.

Defense Against the Dark Arts was another disappointment. For a class meant to teach defense, they sure did a lot of book work. Still, anything was better than listening to Quirrell lecture. He was impossible to understand through his constant stuttering. Hallie had to wonder how a man as twitchy as him could have fought dark creatures. His behavior also left her suspicious for completely different reasons. Out of all her teachers, he seemed to watch her the most, causing Hallie to fiddle nervously with the charm anchoring her glamour throughout every class.

Last, but definitely not least, was Potions. That was the only time of the day that Hallie didn't find cause to worry about her disguise. Professor Snape seemed to hate her from the start, belittling her every attempt made at an assignment, and taking points just for breathing. The reason she felt so at ease though, was because he had once compared her to her 'arrogant father.' It was obvious to Hallie that Snape had some deep-seated issues with her dad, and had transferred his old grudges onto her. As a result, he didn't even see 'Harry,' let alone 'Hallie.' Snape was too blinded by his feelings to pay any attention to what she was really like. As long as that continued, he would never suspect her of being someone else. His attitude did leave a lot to be desired, but as long as he wasn't taking House points, she found his tirades quite amusing. One time, she had nearly burst out laughing as he commented in his usual snide tone about how she was a perfect clone of her father...

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***Flashback:***

"-just like him. An arrogant, spoiled brat who can't see past his own ego-"

Hallie just sat back in her seat as he ranted, not nearly as offended as she should be. The rest of the class was watching her for a reaction, but it certainly wasn't the one they were expecting.

"-same disastrous hair, but much smaller than your father. Wonder what he would think to know his precious son could pass for any first year girl-

*'Oh, god,'* Hallie bit her lip as her professor continued over her shoulder. She tried to ignore him and focus on the potion that should have been blue, but was steadily turning a poisonous green. *'Don't laugh, don't laugh, whatever you do don't-'*

"Potter! Do you find something amusing?"

"No," she answered in a strangled voice. Snape just scowled and stalked back toward his desk. Hallie let out a sigh of relief, but didn't notice as her cauldron began to smoke. Seconds later, her Calming Drought exploded, dousing everything within a two-foot radius, and setting her Potions textbook on fire.

*'Oops...'*

"POTTER! TWENTY POINTS FROM GRYFFINDOR!"

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Other than classes, Hallie had also managed to get on the Gryffindor Quidditch team. It was pure luck that she wasn't expelled during flying lessons. She also had a certain Slytherin to thank. But by some chance of fate, and favoritism on McGonagall's part, Hallie had ended up the youngest seeker in a century. She was pretty good at it too, if the results of the first Quidditch match were anything to go by. That game had almost turned out a disaster, but she did catch the elusive snitch in the end... even if she had nearly swallowed it.

Throughout all the excitement at Hogwarts, Hallie wasn't alone in her endeavors. She had made some friends, as well as a few enemies, during her time at Hogwarts.

Draco Malfoy was still a constant in her life, regardless of how hard she tried to avoid him. He seemed determined to make her life

miserable, along with anyone who associated with her. Their fights became an almost daily routine, and many students often stopped to watch the two argue. A small part of Hallie realized that he was still feeling the brush of her rejection on the train. But the rest of her was too busy calling the blonde git every foul name she could think of, and she knew quite a few thanks to the Weasley twins.

Since the welcoming feast, Hallie had become good friends with the youngest Weasley. Ron was an alright bloke, even if he could be a little thick at times. Hallie had been furious with him on Halloween after he insulted a girl named Hermione Granger when she was within earshot. He'd been ranting about 'the know-it-all' to his friends when the poor girl ran by in tears. Hallie had called Ron an insensitive prick before storming off in a huff, leaving the clueless redhead to ask his equally bewildered friends what he'd done. Hallie had refused to speak to him the rest of the day, both to punish him, and to make sure her big mouth didn't give her away any more.

Lucky for Ron, Hallie had forgiven him, and just in time. They had both rescued Hermione from a rampaging mountain troll, Hallie forced Ron to apologize, and they all grew a little closer.

Where Ron was the light-hearted, Quidditch-obsessed member of the trio, Hermione was the brainy bookworm. She happened to be the cleverest witch in their year, even out-doing Hallie, if she were to be included. Hermione could be a bit bossy when it came to rule-breaking, but she also kept Hallie and Ron from doing anything 'dangerous and foolhardy that could have gotten them killed, or worse, expelled!' Those were her words, anyway.

Of course, it was a little late for that. Hallie should have known that life in a magical castle would be far from safe. This was only Hallie's first year at the school, and she was already questioning whether it was such a good idea to come back for another.

It all started when Malfoy challenged Hallie to a duel in the trophy room. Not only did the little ponce not show up, but he tipped off Filch. Hallie and Ron, plus their two tagalongs, had barely escaped the crazed caretaker, only to end up face to face with a vicious three-headed dog named Fluffy.

Then there was the troll on Halloween. Of all the things that she and Ron could have come across, that was just too much of a coincidence after their talk on the train. Once confronted with the creature, events went similarly to their discussion.

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***Flashback:***

Just as Hallie and Ron were congratulating each other on a job well done, they heard a scream. The terrified voice was coming from the girls' bathroom of all places... meaning they had just locked some poor sod inside with a troll.

They yanked open the door and charged in like true Gryffindors, only to find Hermione Granger cowering behind one of the sinks. Hallie yelled for Ron to grab her while Hallie did what was perhaps one of the stupidest things she'd ever attempted. She jumped onto the troll's club as it pulled back for a swing, and hung on for dear life. Hallie had tried that move once before, on Dudley's fist, but it didn't stop him and his friends from pounding her into the ground. At least she stood a better chance against the troll. He had even less brain power than her cousin, and that was saying something.

Hallie managed to hold out long enough for Ron to hit the troll with *Wingardium Leviosa*, of all things. After the troll was knocked unconscious, the three students stood frozen, just trying to catch their breath. Finally, Hallie turned to Ron, and fell over laughing.

Hermione just watched in bewilderment as the two struggled to stay standing, giggling hysterically at the comatose troll. She could only shake her head from behind them, all the while muttering, "Boys..."

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After Hermione joined their little group, Hallie and her friends began questioning exactly what Hagrid's pet was guarding. In between the usual trouble of finishing overdue homework and dealing with meddlesome Slytherins, they managed to come to the conclusion that Nicholas Flamel and Dumbledore were hiding the Sorcerer's Stone on the third floor. It helped that Hagrid was so lousy at keeping secrets.

Even after they figured that much out, Hallie was still curious as to why it had to be kept at Hogwarts. Who was after it? Ron's money was on Snape. They'd already suspected him of trying to kill Hallie once during the Quidditch game. He certainly wouldn't pass up the chance at any other time. Then there was the way he was always keeping an eye on Quirrell. The stuttering man had seemed terrified when they overheard Snape threatening him one night. If that wasn't enough to prove him guilty, Hallie had seen his bleeding leg on Halloween, and they knew he had paid Fluffy a visit.

Hermione was adamant that it couldn't be one of their teachers, no matter how unpleasant he was. Eventually, they had to take a break from their suspicions when Hagrid needed their help. Somehow, the man had obtained a dragon egg, and the trio was unlucky enough to get dragged into keeping it hidden. By the time baby Norbert had grown bigger than even Fang, they decided enough was enough.

Ron had owed his brother, Charlie, who studied dragons in Romania, and told him of their problem. Charlie had agreed to come with some friends and take Norbert back with them. The only catch was they had to find a way to get the flaming dragon up to the top of the west tower, in the middle of the night, without anyone finding out.

After a teary farewell from Hagrid, both Hallie and Hermione carried Norbert up to the tower, covered in the invisibility cloak Hallie had received at Christmas. Unfortunately, Ron wasn't there to help as he was being treated by the school nurse for a rather nasty bite inflicted by the teething dragon.

Hallie and Hermione managed to send Norbert off with no problems, and were heading back to their dormitory, filled with relief. They were so preoccupied with their success, that they left Hallie's cloak behind and were caught by Filch. It turned out that Malfoy was responsible for the trouble they found themselves in once again. Ron had accidentally given him the letter about Norbert, wedged inside an old textbook. The Slytherin immediately ran off to tell McGonagall. Poor Neville got pulled into things as well. He'd found out that Malfoy was up to something and had tried to warn Hallie. The only positive thing about that experience was that the stern woman didn't believe the

story about the dragon for a second, and just gave all four students detention.

The detention that followed was one that would stick in Hallie's memory forever. They had been employed by Hagrid to search the Forbidden Forest. They were trying to find an injured unicorn, but Hallie found so much more. She got paired up with Malfoy and Fang after the prat tried to scare Neville. While he was busy muttering about Hagrid and tattling to his father, Hallie had stumbled onto the dead unicorn, and the dark figure drinking its blood. Her scar had started burning like nothing she'd ever felt before. Malfoy took off screaming, and left Hallie to the approaching stranger. She had thought she was done for until a centaur charged in. Whatever had attacked Hallie fled, and Firenze took her back to Hagrid.

However, from that moment on, Hallie knew exactly who was after the stone: Voldemort. She hadn't needed to see him that night to realize who the cloaked figure was.

As Firenze had told her, "It is a monstrous thing to slay a unicorn. Only one who has nothing to lose, and everything to gain, would commit such a crime. The blood of a unicorn will keep you alive, even if you are an inch from death, but at a terrible price. You have slain something pure and defenseless to save yourself, and you will have but a half-life, a cursed life, from the moment the blood touches your lips."

She had asked him who would be that desperate, and the centaur made her realize the truth. Voldemort needed to drink unicorn blood to stay alive, but it was only temporary. To live forever, he would need one thing; the sorcerer's stone.

Overall, Hallie's year had been hectic. At times, it was truly amazing. For the first time in her life she felt like she belonged. She wasn't a freak, and she had two wonderful friends. But then she came crashing back to reality. Everything she was doing was a lie. She wasn't 'Harry' Potter, and it hurt that she couldn't tell anyone.

Everyday, it pained her just to see Ron and Hermione. She wanted nothing more than to tell them everything. But what if they rejected her? What if they decided she wasn't worth it? She'd done nothing



but lie to them for months when they'd told her everything. Ron had shared his low self-esteem, the way he was always compared to his brothers. Hermione had told her how she'd always wanted to fit in, but others disliked her all-knowing attitude. They had become the family Hallie always wanted, and yet, none of it was real.

Out of the two of them, it was Hermione who came the closest to learning Hallie's secret on her own. She had confronted her in the common room one night to speak of her suspicions, but it was nowhere near the truth.

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***Flashback:***

Hallie sighed as she put down her Transfiguration book. She was never going to get that spell... She stared into the fire, her hand reaching up to play with the charm, as had become habit when she was stressed. Suddenly, she heard footsteps, and turned just in time to see one of her best friends watching her with a calculating gaze. Hallie gulped and checked the empty common room. Ron wasn't in sight.

"Harry, can we talk?" Hermione asked, taking a seat across from her friend.

"Sure, 'Mione. What's up?"

Hermione smiled carefully, seeming to consider something. "Harry, I've been thinking... You know you can tell me anything, right?"

"Of course," Hallie said, inwardly cursing.

"Good, because I would never judge you."

*'Oh, no, here it comes,'* Hallie thought nervously.

"Harry, I understand if you have a different view point than most guys-"

Hallie frowned. Where was she going with that?

"-and it wouldn't matter to me at all if you liked other boys. I'm sure Ron would be alright with it as well, in time-"

"What!" Hallie sputtered in shock. "Hermione, I don't- I mean- I'm not gay!"

*'Of all the conclusions for her to draw...'*

"You're not?" Hermione seemed startled. Obviously, she wasn't used to be wrong about something.

"No, I'm not!" *'Sort of,'* Hallie amended to herself. She did like boys, but she wasn't about to let that get out. The Boy-Who-Lived persona was one thing, but a gay one was not going to work.

"Oh! I'm sorry, Harry. I guess I shouldn't have jumped to conclusions. It's just that sometimes you're so different compared to Ron..."

"It's okay, Hermione. But just because I'm a guy, it doesn't mean we all have the emotional capacity of a teaspoon," Hallie teased, using the very thing Hermione had said to Ron.

The other girl grinned at the allusion, before standing up. "Well, what do you say we go find your lesser half? He's been complaining all day that you owe him a rematch. I told him you were doing the responsible thing by working on homework, and that he should do the same."

"Bet he didn't like that," Hallie snickered as she put her book in her bag. She joined Hermione and they walked toward the portrait hole.

"No, he didn't."

Hallie snorted. "I don't know why I even bother to play chess with him, though. I always lose!"

"Well, practice makes perfect, Harry."

"Yeah, so I should beat Ron in, say, six more years?"

The two laughed until Hermione said, "Actually, by then he'd just be even better."

Hallie sighed in mock hurt and held a hand to her chest, "Well, at least I'll always have Quidditch. I need something to hold my fragile psyche together."

As they stepped into the corridor, Hermione placed a hand on Hallie's arm. Her friend looked at her questioningly.

"I am sorry about before. I just worry about you sometimes. You're always so tight-lipped when you have a problem! Remember, if you ever need to talk, Harry, I'm here."

Hallie nodded, "Yeah, I know." *'I don't deserve friends like them...'*

---

Sometimes, she wondered if it was all worth it. Would she have been better off entering the wizarding world as herself? Maybe she was just a coward. She was afraid to let others see her in the beginning, and now she dreaded the day they would learn her secret. Both Dumbledore and McGonagall were the only ones she could talk to. Dumbledore tried to reassure her that it wasn't permanent, and he even pleaded with her to tell Ron and Hermione. He was positive they would understand.

McGonagall on the other hand, seemed to feel guilty that she'd allowed Hallie to go through with it all in the first place. Not that it stopped her from treating Hallie like everyone else when it came to school rules. The large chunk of points she'd lost Gryffindor just a few days ago could attest to that.

The entire house was barely speaking to Hallie and her friends, although the famous 'Harry Potter' received the brunt of it. Malfoy didn't seem fazed as it now put Slytherin in first place for the House Cup. Although he did look a little paler, if that was even possible, after the encounter in the forest. He didn't dare taunt Hallie after the way he'd reacted in the face of danger.

To add to her misery, Hallie was always on her guard. She couldn't help feeling a bit paranoid with the knowledge that Voldemort was

close by. Somehow, she felt like it was her responsibility if something should happen. After all, she was the Boy-Who-Lived... It was her unspoken duty to be the hero, and she was really getting sick of it. Still, there was nothing she could do for now. She would just have to wait and see how things played out...

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Draco Malfoy was not having a good year, and it all started when he met Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, Gryffindor's Golden Child, and self-proclaimed rival of the Slytherin Prince.

Seriously, what could he have been thinking, wanting Potter as his friend? The boy seemed to infuriate Draco with his very presence! And as if dealing with him wasn't bad enough, Draco had to put up with his little Gryffindork friends! What could Potter have possibly seen in a Muggle-lover and a Mudblood? To think, he chose them over Draco, the sole heir of one of the wealthiest pureblood families in the entire bloody country! People were practically falling over themselves to befriend him!

After the initial embarrassment when Potter refused his hand on the train, Draco had made a promise to himself. He vowed to make Harry Potter's life a living hell. After all, no one turns down a Malfoy.

Arrogant prats aside, Draco's first year at Hogwarts wasn't a total disaster. He was sorted into Slytherin; as if a Malfoy could go anywhere else! He had only been on the stool for a second, not even allowing that filthy hat to touch his head. After taking a seat between Crabbe and Goyle (he was *still* wondering how they had managed anything but Hufflepuff) Draco had watched the rest of the Sorting proceed.

Potter had gone into Gryffindor, of course, among a standing ovation from the Weasley twins. Up at the Head Table, he had seen his godfather grimace. It took a few moments for McGonagall to come to her senses and continue with the rest of the students. The know-it-all Mudblood had become a Gryffindor, although she was more of a Ravenclaw than anyone. Weasel had joined the rest of his pack. Even Neville Longbottom had managed to find himself in Gryffindor by some miracle. The dunce had nearly tripped over his feet in his excitement.

Draco had recognized several faces joining him at the Slytherin table, both old and new. Pansy, unfortunately had ended up right across from him, simpering throughout the entire feast. Theodore Nott, whose father was an old acquaintance of Lucius, was there as well.

It was also a pleasant surprise for Draco to see Blaise Zabini at Hogwarts. They had been friends when they were younger, until the death of Blaise's third step-father. Due to pressure from the ministry, his mother had elected to move to Italy where the rest of their family originated. Zabini was one of the few people Draco could tolerate at Hogwarts. Unlike the rest of his house, Blaise didn't treat Draco like royalty. It gave Draco the chance to relax without the pressure of who his father was, but it also meant Blaise was the only one who could get away with teasing him.

Classes were an interesting affair. Draco was getting top grades as expected. His father had been teaching him privately for years, although this was the first time he'd been able to practice with a wand. The teachers were pathetic, however. No surprise when one considered the headmaster. Most of the professors treated Draco as any other student, although there were a couple exceptions.

Professor McGonagall was the Head of Gryffindor, and rather biased toward Slytherins. She was never partial toward her own House, but she did give the cold shoulder toward most of the snakes. Draco in particular seemed to irritate her, although it wasn't his fault Longbottom got hit with that Leg-Locker Curse in the hallway. Draco was only practicing when the Gryffindor stepped into the path of his hex. Not that he tried very hard to undo it afterwards. He and his dorm mates were too busy laughing at the sight of Longbottom trying to hop up the stairs. He was no doubt hoping that the Mudblood could fix him.

Snape was the polar opposite of McGonagall in classes. It may have had something to do with him being the Slytherin Head of House, and everyone knew he favored them to make up for the rest of the school's treatment, but when it came to Draco, there was another reason. Severus Snape was his godfather.

He had been there to watch Draco grow up, and had been the only one to ever really care about him. When Narcissa was too busy attending political functions, Severus would take Draco for the day, and let him play Quidditch. When Lucius was disgusted by his son's behavior, and showed his displeasure, Severus was the one to comfort him. Neither of his parents had ever done more than was

absolutely required in order to raise a proper, polite, pureblood wizard. If not for Severus, Draco would be nothing more than a mindless puppet. It was from his godfather that Draco had inherited his knack for Potions, not to mention his sharp wit and never-ending sarcasm. Severus was all he had ever needed growing up. He was Draco's 'Uncle Sevvv,' a name Severus had forbidden him from ever using after he turned nine. It was excellent blackmail.

However, Draco looked forward to Potions class for an entirely different reason. It was the one class they shared with the Gryffindors. While that in itself was not usually a good thing, if the professor was on your side, it made for an entertaining affair. In other words, the Slytherins could torment the pathetic Golden Trio all they liked, and not even lose points while doing so. His favorite attempt so far was back at the beginning of the year.

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***Flashback:***

Potter had been acting odd all lesson, alternately paling and blushing. The tell-tale twitching at the corner of his lips hinted that he was trying desperately not to laugh. It certainly wasn't the type of reaction one would expect from the Boy-Who-Lived as he listened to someone insult his dead father so casually.

Draco decided to liven things up a bit, seeing as how his own housemates were growing bored with Potter's lack of response to Snape's jibes. So, when the boy wasn't looking, Draco lobbed a bundle of fluxweed into Potter's potion. The resulting explosion five minutes later was spectacular, and the faintly shocked look on Potter's face was priceless.

His godfather was furious, and took twenty points from Gryffindor, although Draco was positive he had seen the real cause. The man spared Draco a small smirk as he was packing up his books, tilting his head in the direction of Potter as the boy ran out of the room. Weasley and Granger followed, the red-head not even bothering to lower his voice as he expressed his colorful opinion of their professor. Granger was heard scolding him for his lack of respect all the way out of the dungeons.

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Other than classes, there was also Quidditch to keep Draco occupied. Unfortunately, there was that ridiculous rule preventing first years from trying out for their House team. It was like they expected the eleven-year-olds to just fall out of the air due to their inexperience. Of course, that rule didn't seem to apply to Harry-bloody-Potter. Draco still got a bitter taste in his mouth every time he thought of flying lessons with the Gryffindors. If only he had kept his big mouth shut.

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***Flashback:***

Draco and his friends burst out laughing as soon as Hooch was out of sight. Looking at the place where Longbottom had crashed, he spotted the sunlight glinting off something in the grass and bent down to pick it up. Grinning as he realized what it was, Draco held it up for everyone to see.

"Look, it's that Remembrall Longbottom's Gran sent him! Pity, if that lump had thought to give this a squeeze, he might have remembered to land on his fat arse!"

The Slytherins roared with laughter, while the Gryffindors glowered. Parvati Patil tried to defend Longbottom, and Pansy stepped in.

"Hey, Parvati, I didn't know you had a thing for cry-babies!" She giggled at her own joke, simultaneously fluttering her eyes in Draco's direction. The blonde just rolled his eyes at her actions, while Blaise snickered.

"Give it here, Malfoy!" A bold voice cut in, and the surrounding students hushed. Draco turned around and came face to face with the Boy Wonder and his temperamental sidekick.

Smirking, Draco pretended to think about it. "No, I think I'll leave it somewhere for Longbottom to find himself." He grabbed one of the discarded brooms off the ground and leapt into the air, before adding, "How about up a tree?"

Laughing, he took off into the air, the Remembrall clutched in his fist. Hooch had warned them to stay on the ground, but since when did a Malfoy take orders from anyone?



Back on the ground, he watched as his fellow classmates started bickering with each other. Draco did a particularly daring swoop and listened to his friends cheer. Potter seemed to be fighting with the bushy-haired Mudblood, but then he surprised them all by taking up a broom and lifting off as though he'd been doing it all his life. Draco himself was stunned at the unexpected grace Potter showed as he leveled with him. Wasn't Potter Muggle-raised?

Glaring, the boy held out his hand and demanded, "Now, hand it over, Malfoy!"

"Why should I?" Draco asked coolly, giving the ball a little toss and catching it one handed.

Potter swelled with indignation but only smirked instead of shouting as the other expected. Draco, despite himself, felt slightly worried by the gleam in the boy's eyes. Suddenly, Potter aimed his broom at Draco, and shot towards him, nearly unseating the blonde in the process. Draco barely got out of the way by using the sloth grip roll he'd once seen used in a Quidditch magazine.

Gasping, and bit shaken, he yelled at the amused-looking boy, "What do you think you're doing, Potter? Are you trying to get us both killed?"

"Not at all, Malfoy," he replied with a lopsided grin. "What's the matter, scared because you're little bodyguards can't help you now? Give it back, before I knock you off that broom!"

Draco sneered weakly, but took the threat seriously. Potter was just Gryffindor enough to try it. Deciding to end this and get back to the ground as soon as possible, Draco lifted the glass ball for him to see it.

"Have it your way, then! Catch!" With that, Draco tossed the ball in the air and flew back down to the field. Blaise and Nott clapped him on the back, and Draco looked to see how Potter was fairing. The boy was actually trying to catch the damn thing in a straight dive that could only be considered suicidal. Both Slytherins and Gryffindors watched with bated breath as he dropped. Five feet from the ground, the boy pulled up, the Remembrall secure in his hands.

Potter landed in a mass of Gryffindors, his cheeks flushed with excitement as his housemates congratulated him. Rolling his eyes, Draco caught sight of a familiar figure in a pointed witches' hat, stalking towards the unsuspecting students, her lips set in a tight line.

"POTTER!"

Said boy blanched at the expression on his Head of House's face. Paling, he dropped his broom as though scalded. McGonagall grabbed him by the wrist and began herding him back toward the school, shouting about dangerous stunts all the way.

The Gryffindors looked like they were already planning Potter's funeral as they were overcome by a total gloom. It seemed like their hero was about to be expelled. This time tomorrow, the bane of Draco's existence would be packed and on the train home. The Slytherins couldn't stop beaming.

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Unfortunately, Potter wasn't expelled, as Draco had been expecting. Instead, the git strolled into the Great Hall the next morning like nothing had happened, and sat down chatting with his friends. When the owl post arrived, a long, thin package landed in front of the boy. It was in the unmistakable shape of a broom. Draco followed the Gryffindors into the hall to investigate.

He managed to snatch the package out of Potter's hands, and felt the hardwood handle under the brown paper. Flitwick showed up just as Draco was planning on getting them in trouble. It turned out that the Charms professor knew all about Potter's new broom. Weasley snatched it back from Draco's slack grip, and the two walked off chortling at his expense. Potter actually had the nerve to look back and announce his thanks to the blonde for getting him a spot on the Gryffindor Quidditch team.

Yes, because of Draco, Harry Potter became the school's star Seeker. Sometimes, life just wasn't fair.

Grudgingly, Draco had to admit that the boy wasn't completely talentless, but it was more dumb luck than anything. During the first Quidditch match against his own House, Potter's broom had started

jerking all over the place. At first glance, it seemed that Potter was just showing off, at least, until the boy actually went flying over the handle of his broom. Potter was left hanging on by one hand as the Nimbus 2000 rose higher above most of the game.

Not had many noticed what was happening to their savior, but Draco had. He wasn't surprised to see his godfather chanting a counter curse from the stands (it was his duty under Dumbledore to protect even the lowliest student) but Draco was caught off guard to see who was doing the actual cursing. Weak, sniveling Professor Quirrell was jinxing Harry Potter's broom.

Draco would have bothered to ponder the situation more if he hadn't been distracted by the rest of the stands jumping up and screaming. Glancing down onto the field, he saw Potter on all fours and gagging. He thought the boy was going to be sick until he spat something into his hand, and held up the Golden Snitch a moment later. Draco hoped someone remembered to wash that thing.

After that disastrous flying lesson, Draco had started another confrontation with Potter in the Great Hall. When the boy opened his mouth to retort, he brought up the subject of the blonde being much braver on the ground with Crabbe and Goyle on hand. Of course he was! As if anyone could feel safe in the air with a lunatic Gryffindor!

Still, Draco couldn't let the comment slide. It just wasn't in his nature. So, he challenged Potter to a wizard's duel. The idiot just stared at Draco blankly before Weasley accepted for him. He offered himself as Potter's second, while Draco nominated Crabbe. Really, he would have chosen someone with more brains than brawn, but it wasn't as if he was planning to show up anyway.

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***Flashback:***

Draco grinned and began to reset the chessboard for another game. Nott pushed away from the table, scowling. This was the second time he had lost to Draco, and he was short his queen after only his fifth move. "So, who else is ready to lose?"

Around him, his friends were lounging in the common room. It was growing quite late, but none of the boys felt any desire to sleep on a Saturday night.

Blaise sat sideways in his chair, legs thrown over the armrest, and a book propped open on his stomach. Saving his page, he looked up from his reading and raised an inquisitive eyebrow in Draco's direction. "Don't you have a duel to get to?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about, Zabini," he replied innocently.

"The one you challenged Potter to? You know, they're probably already waiting in the trophy room. Aren't you going to meet them?"

Draco snorted. "Of course not. Although, I think Mr. Filch will be joining them shortly. I believe he received an anonymous tip that some students would be up to no good in there..."

Blaise snickered, "I can't wait to see the look on Potter's face tomorrow when he realizes you set him up!"

"I did no such thing!" Draco protested. "It's not my fault they actually believed I would duel them. As if I would waste my impeccable talent on them! The best Potter could do would be a Tickling Hex!"

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The next day, it wasn't hard for Draco to spot Potter. One had to be blind to miss the full on death glares the boy was sending him all day. Didn't Gryffindors have any notion of subtlety? Obviously not, since Weasley looked ready to strangle him every time they passed in the halls.

Potter and Weasley looked as though they'd had a rough night, even if they had escaped Filch. They were both pale, with dark shadows under their eyes. At the same time, neither could seem to shut up if the whispering going on between their bent heads was anything to go by.

Draco resolved to watch his back for the time being. He didn't fancy getting ambushed by angry lions. They really did take offense much

too easily. Sure, he supposed he was a bit in the wrong for leaving his fellow students to the notoriously sadistic caretaker. Did Draco feel any remorse? Hell no, he thought the situation was bloody hilarious.

Months passed without any serious problems. Draco still took every chance to plague the Gryffindors, and found great delight in watching them lose points every Potions class, but nothing truly note-worthy happened. School itself was flying by, and the initial excitement at using magic was waning.

The only thing of interest to occur was at the end of October, Halloween in fact. Draco's family had never taken much stock in the holiday, at least not since the Muggles took it over. All Hallows Eve used to be a sacred time among pureblood families, to show remembrance for their ancestors and the creation of magic. Now it was a time when the Muggles tried to imitate wizards with their horribly insulting costumes, and people like Crabbe and Goyle made pigs of themselves. Pathetic.

The Hogwarts feast wasn't too bad, though, and the Great Hall was interesting enough to see. The real excitement didn't come until their disgrace of a Defense teacher burst through the double doors, screaming at the top of his lungs. After announcing to the entire student body that a troll was loose in the dungeons, he fainted.

The feast was undeniably canceled once the students whipped themselves into a frenzy, and all over a simple troll. Draco wasn't worried, not at all. He was only under the table to avoid getting trampled...

The students were all ushered back to their dorms by the prefects, although, Draco did catch his godfather slipping through a side door when no one was watching. He wondered where he was going, but soon forgot when the irate prefect had to stop and point out to their careless Headmaster that the Slytherins couldn't exactly go through the dungeons. Barmy old man couldn't have cared less about them as long as his precious Gryffindors were safe.

Draco later learned by way of the Hogwarts rumor mill, a.k.a. Pansy, that some first years had knocked out the troll in a girls' bathroom.

He'd had a hard time believing that any student could take on a fully grown mountain troll, and come away unscathed, but apparently, someone had. His money was on Potter and his groupies after watching the way they suddenly welcomed the know-it-all, Granger, into their little club. Something must have happened to make them so buddy-buddy, when he had heard Weasley insulting her to tears just the day before. Even Draco hadn't managed that.

With every recounting of the tale, Draco would only roll his eyes and mutter about foolhardy Gryffindors. Then he would tell himself that he was spending far too much time around Severus. His snarkiness was rubbing off.

Speaking of the Potions Master, Draco had indeed spent a large amount of his free time perusing his godfather's private chambers and discussing mundane topics, such as his studies, and the mockery that was his godfather's second year Hufflepuff class. He would often spend the few hours after dinner with Severus, drinking tea, and generally avoiding his housemates. Even Zabini could be tiresome at times.

Actually, that wasn't a surprise. Draco could remember when they were younger, and all the times the boy had driven him to distraction. At least he was past the phase of jumping on the furniture. He could still recall his mother's reaction the first time she caught them bouncing on Draco's expensive Acromantula silk bed sheets while wearing their muddy play shoes.

As December came to a close, and the Christmas break neared, Draco kept in contact with his parents by owl post. It was mostly his mother just checking up and sending her usual batch of store-bought sweets with his eagle owl. He held onto the belief that she was doing it only for appearances, since she hadn't let him near anything other than oatmeal cookies since the incident.

His father rarely spared the time to write his son, and when he did, it was for anything but pleasantries. So far, Draco had been praised for his outstanding grades in the report Severus sent his father, but told he could do better. Lucius had also wanted to know how things were going with Potter. He wasn't pleased to hear that the two were

nowhere near friends, but admitted that he hadn't been expecting much. Apparently, he remembered dealing with James Potter in his school years, and found the arrogant man repulsive. He commended Draco for his effort, but realized it was a lost cause.

Draco was relieved to hear that because there was no way he would beg for Potter's forgiveness. He could just imagine the reaction he would get from that. His friends would drag him straight to their Head of House to make sure he wasn't under some type of potion, and Potter would think he was insane. It might have been worth it just to see Potter's face, but Draco wasn't willing to degrade himself for that. It was so much easier to just taunt the boy, especially with the Mudblood around.

Christmas arrived, and Draco went home with the majority of his peers. His parents threw their annual ball at the manor, that Draco was forced to attend, despite his many protests. He had actually tried to escape midway through, only to be caught on the balcony by Pansy, and physically dragged back inside. Had he mentioned how much he despised that girl?

Blaise, unfortunately, could not attend. His mother preferred to keep her return to England quiet for the time being, and it didn't help that every dignitary around was invited to the ball, specifically their useless excuse for a minister. Draco knew his father only put up with the man because it gave him so much leeway in the ministry. That, and Fudge was so easy to keep complacent with the Malfoys' generous donations.

Once the need for formalities was over, Draco got to enjoy the rest of his vacation in relative peace and quiet. In other words, after receiving his usual stock of expensive gifts from both family and friends, he didn't see heads or tails of his parents unless it was for meals in the dining room. He ended up staying outside and flying around the grounds after he finished any homework. He also Floo-ed over to Blaise's home, and ended up spending the last of winter break there. It wasn't like his parents cared.

School started up again, and Draco went through each day feeling rather bored with it all. Messing with the Gryffindors had lost its

novelty, and even moving onto Hufflepuffs couldn't give him the same satisfaction. There was no point in angering the Ravenclaws. They happened to be the only House that didn't automatically mark the Slytherins as evil. They did have brains, after all.

Once again, it was the Gryffindor trio that solved Draco's dilemma. They always did seem to be involved, but this time it was pure coincidence.

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***Flashback:***

Draco was visiting the library one afternoon, searching for a book on hexes. Sadly, the Hogwarts library was so child-proofed that the only texts worth reading lay in the Restricted Section, which Draco couldn't get access to without Dumbledore finding out. Even his godfather couldn't help him there.

He was just about to give up and go back to the dungeons when he spotted Granger's frizzy mane from behind a stack of books. That in itself wasn't unusual. What managed to finally peak Draco's interest was her two friends looking equally absorbed in their reading. All three were sitting at a table in the far corner of the library, as though hoping to attract less notice. They had a rather impressive collection of books scattered across their table, but Draco couldn't make out any of the titles from where he stood.

Hoping to get a closer look, he strode forward, occasionally scanning shelves and watching the Gryffindors through his peripheral vision. When he was only one shelf away, he stopped to listen, hoping he could hear them over the noisy fourth years nearby. Where was Pince when you needed her?

He needn't have worried, for Weasley solved the sound issue by tossing down his book in disgust, and venting his irritation loudly.

"Hermione, can't we go now? We've been here for hours, and we haven't found anything on this Flamel bloke!" he whined, looking at Potter for back up.

*'Flamel?'* Draco thought. *'Where have I heard that name?'*



"Ron's right," Potter said, putting aside his own book. "We've looked everywhere."

Granger glanced at the two, seeming frustrated, "I just know I've seen his name, though! If only I could remember where..."

"Well, he's got to be someone important," Weasley said. "Why else would Dumbledore need all that security? Fluffy's not just there for show-"

Potter suddenly stopped him from saying more. Granger motioned for him to be quiet, and pretended to go back to her reading. The red-head didn't understand why until he followed Potter's gaze. The emerald eyes happened to be burning in Draco's direction.

Knowing he'd been spotted, Draco gave up the pretense of browsing for a book and locked gazes with the suspicious boy.

"Well, if it isn't Potty, Weasel, and the Mudblood-"

Weasley jerked out of his chair at the point, and it was only Granger's restraining hand that kept him down as she also gave him an icy stare.

"What do you want, Malfoy?" Potter tried to place a casual hand over the title of one of his books, but Draco caught the words 'Famous Wizards.' He held back a snort. Potter was probably researching himself.

"Nothing, Scar-head, just wondering what a bunch of Gryffindors are doing cooped up in the library on such a beautiful day. Granger I can understand, but shouldn't you two be off playing whatever it is that keeps your short attention spans happy?"

"What about you, Malfoy? Don't you have anything better to do?"

Draco spared the Boy-Who-Lived a sarcastic look, "What, and give up my favorite hobby?"

"Malfoy," Potter replied in a dry voice, "if your only goal in life is to annoy us, maybe you should switch to Hufflepuff. After all, aren't Slytherins supposed to be ambitious?"

Weasley snorted, and Granger tried to hide her smile behind her book. Draco sneered, "Like you would know anything about Slytherins, Potter. I suppose I can let it slip this once, Gryffindors never were known for their intelligence."

Potter didn't rise to the bait, and only commented, "I think you're losing your touch if that's the best you can come up with. Now, why don't you run along, Malfoy. I'm sure by now Crabbe and Goyle are lost without you."

Draco rolled his eyes, but left it at that. He really should have protested more when his father stuck him with those two idiots. They were ruining his image.

On his way out of the library, Draco clamped down on the satisfied smirk threatening to break free. Potter had tried too hard to get him to leave. Normally, Weasley wouldn't let things rest before at least one of them lost points. That clinched Draco's suspicion that they were hiding something, and he resolved to find out what.

Draco didn't get his chance until a week later, when he caught sight of the trio making their way outside the castle. He assumed they were going to visit that oaf, Hagrid, but Draco decided to follow just in case.

He watched them enter the cramped hut, and waited until it was safe to get near. He finally made it to the single window that was partially obscured by a lacey curtain. Peering inside, Draco saw the absolute last thing he expected. He stared at the four people crowded around a scrubbed wooden table, and saw a shiny black egg cracking down the middle. Only seconds later, it split open and a wrinkled, lizard-like creature spilled out. Draco's mouth was hanging open in an expression that would have surely killed his reputation had anyone seen it. They had just hatched a bloody dragon!

Before Draco could leave, however, he was spotted. He caught a glimpse of those inside just before he took off running for the castle. Three of the faces inside sported absolute horror at his discovery.

Potter's face, however, was set in a mask of fury. It was the worry for his own safety that gave Draco an extra sprint.

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For two weeks, Draco reveled in the power that came along with his knowledge. It was obvious the Gryffindors were on edge. On more than one occasion, he had seen them whispering urgently or passing notes in class. It was obvious they were also going down to see the groundskeeper several nights a week.

For his part, Draco didn't say anything, deciding to keep quiet until the perfect opportunity arose, preferably when it would be most detrimental to Potter. He didn't say a word about what he had seen that day, not even to his friends. Blaise did comment once on the unusual behavior of the Golden Trio, and the constant unease they showed. Draco only shrugged it off with the excuse that they'd probably done something to get on Snape's bad side.

Draco continued to watch Potter and his friends for any sudden changes. He was curious as to what they planned to do with the dragon. After all, as amusing as it would be to see the oaf's house catch fire, it would cause a good deal of trouble if the baby dragon got loose on the grounds. Draco also knew that dragons didn't stay small for very long. By now, the thing could bigger than most first years!

On Thursday, Draco was startled during what he had come to call 'Potter Watching' when he realized that the Weasel was absent. He learned the reason why in Potions class when Granger was forced to make his excuses to Snape. Apparently, Weasley was in the hospital wing. Draco decided to do some investigating on Weasley's sudden injury, and maybe just have a good laugh at the boy's expense while he was at it.

Slipping into the hospital wing was easy enough. He waited until Pomfrey was out of the way to approach the boy's bed. He'd heard the nurse questioning the unusual bite on his hand. Draco had to hold back a laugh when Weasley stuttered some cock-and-bull story about a dog. He had to agree with Pomfrey's incredulous expression. Weasley's hand had swollen to twice its normal size and was tinged purple. Yeah, a dog did that. Maybe one with poisonous fangs.

Draco was sure that the dragon was responsible, and used the knowledge to threaten Weasley. He mentioned telling the nurse, purely for Weasley's own good, of course. While the other boy floundered, Draco grabbed the copy of *Quidditch Through the Ages* that Weasley had on his bedside table. He was just in time for Madam Pomfrey to return. She pursed her lips at the sight of Draco and wanted to know why he was there. He gave her his most charming smile in reply and shrugged, saying he only wanted to borrow one of Weasley's books, and to see how he was doing. She bought the lie with a slightly suspicious glance, but Draco managed to run back to the dungeons without reprimand.

It wasn't until he was back in the dormitory that he found it. Draco was reclining in front of the fire, and sneering at the patched up copy he still held in his hands. He tossed it to the side in disgust, but was surprised when something additional fell out. At first, he assumed it was just a loose page, but when he picked it up, he found a slip of folded parchment, covered in a quick scrawl.

As his eyes scanned across the note, Draco's lips stretched in a devious smirk. When he finished, he stared into the fire contemplatively, the letter crumpled in his fist.

So, Potter was planning to get rid of the dragon at last. Now all Draco had to do was sneak up to the tallest tower at midnight on Saturday, and just maybe he could catch Potter in the act of smuggling off an illegal dragon... That would show him.

Unfortunately, Draco's little scheme, didn't go exactly according to plan. Actually, it was a total disaster. He supposed he had been too hasty in his excitement. He really should have thought of some type of back up, or at least an alibi. Really, he was disappointed in himself. What kind of Slytherin was he, that he couldn't even sneak out without getting noticed?

Yes, Draco was horribly ashamed to say that he was caught halfway up to the tower by none other than McGonagall. Even Filch would have been a better choice. She showed up as he was turning a corner, still dressed in her tartan bathrobe and hair net. What the hell was she doing dressed like that in the corridors anyway? Draco had

nearly jumped out of his skin when she turned up in front of him. He didn't know how she could have appeared so suddenly when the only thing he had seen in the halls so far was a tabby cat prowling around for mice.

McGonagall then proceeded to drag him to her office by the ear, as if he was some sort of child! He still thanked Merlin that no one was around to see his humiliation. Draco was too stunned at the time to come up with a good reason for being out at night. The only thing he managed to blurt out was the truth. Harry Potter was out wandering the school with a dragon. In the case of Gryffindors, they say that the truth shall set you free. All it did for Draco was a gasp of outrage and a sore ear. Ah, and let's not forget that detention and twenty points from Slytherin.

Luckily, at least in Draco's opinion, he wasn't the only one to suffer. Barely ten minutes into McGonagall's rant, Filch showed up dragging along two miserable Gryffindors. Granger looked ready to cry in front of her Head of House, while Potter turned bright red at the sight of Malfoy. At least that was some consolation. He wasn't the only one about to get punished. Draco was surprised, however, when McGonagall brought their attention to Longbottom sitting morosely in a chair at the corner of the room. Draco had somehow missed the boy's presence. It turned out he had overheard Draco earlier that day. Damn, he knew he shouldn't have told Crabbe and Goyle where he was going, but he had needed an excuse so they wouldn't follow him. To think, he had been worried about *them* getting him caught.

As punishment for their misdeeds, and Draco had to roll his eyes at McGonagall's version of events, they would each lose fifty points from their house, and be given detention. Personally, Draco wasn't too worried. Normally, fifty points was quite a lot, but multiply that by three, and the Gryffindors were royally screwed. That would put them in last place for the House Cup, and conveniently put Slytherin in first.

The next day, he was witness to the absolute outrage of the Gryffindor house. They were furious to see more than a hundred points disappear in one stupid incident. Potter and his friends were practically outcast by their fellows. Draco, on the other hand, was a hero. Not many knew of his involvement. Their loss of points was

completely overshadowed in light of events. Those that did hear about his part were ecstatic. They had been worried about losing their winning streak after the outcome of the Quidditch match, but now there was no way Gryffindor could catch up. They were in last place because of Harry Potter, and everyone knew it.

Potter himself spent his days looking abnormally downcast. He and his friends were trying as hard as possible to be invisible. Even Granger stopped showing off in lessons. They were all miserable, and Draco couldn't be happier. At least, for the moment.

There was still the detention, which Draco was not looking forward to, but it was a small price to pay. He could grit his teeth and deal with whatever menial chore they were given. It was nothing.

Once again, Draco was wrong. He had to wonder just how many mistakes he was going to make that year. Good thing his father hadn't heard about them. Lucius Malfoy did receive a notice about his son's punishment, but as it was preceded by a letter about Gryffindor's losses from his godfather, it was null and void.

The detention itself was what had Draco so irked. While normal situations called for a few hours of cleaning under the caretaker's vindictive eye, Dumbledore had finally gone too far. He was sending a bunch of first years out into the dark forest with nothing but a moronic half giant and his cowardly dog for protection. Draco chose the dog.

When they were first informed of their assignment, Draco had balked. They were expected to go in *there*? Wasn't that forbidden? Besides, there were werewolves! He'd heard enough stories of what they could do to people, and he was not above admitting his fear of them. Well, until the Gryffindors started laughing at him. Then he grabbed up a lantern and ordered the drooling mutt to move.

Hagrid stuck Draco with Longbottom at first, leaving him to follow the splashes of unicorn blood while the other boy twitched and flinched at every crackle of leaves and sigh of wind. Really, Draco couldn't help himself. It was just too tempting at the time, so he couldn't be blamed for taking the opportunity to make the baby wet his pants. All

he did was set off a few sparks, and Longbottom was screaming his head off.

The giant burst through the foliage only seconds later, and scowled at the sight of a whimpering Longbottom while Draco was bent over in stitches. As a result of his actions, he was forced to continue their search with Potter instead. Wasn't the detention punishment enough? No, they had to pair him up with the Golden Boy.

As they tramped through the forest, coming upon larger puddles of the slivery liquid, Potter decided to put the blonde in his place. Draco was only speaking his mind when Potter interrupted his completely justified tirade.

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***Flashback:***

Draco grumbled in annoyance as he tripped over another upraised tree root. It shouldn't have been possible, seeing how massive they were, but he still managed to catch his shoe on every one in the dark. He held up the lantern higher, hoping to shed some light on the foggy ground.

He heard Potter stumbling along behind him, the dog at his side. Potter didn't seem overly concerned with their joint predicament, simply scanning the ground as he walked for traces of unicorn blood. Draco was frustrated with the simple duty. He would mutter every now and then about the futile situation. Why should they be out here, traipsing around in the wilderness? This was servants' work!

"-When my father hears about this-

"Oh, do shut up, Malfoy!" Potter finally spoke up, seemingly fed up with Draco's moaning.

Draco gasped at the interruption, and turned around to glare at the other boy. "How dare you-

"Would you quit whining already?" Potter asked, throwing up his hands in desperation.

Draco was insulted. Malfoys did *not* whine! "I am not-"

"Yes, you are, and incase you've forgotten, Malfoy, this is all your fault!" The emerald-eyed boy pointed at him accusingly.

"My fault?" Draco sputtered. "You're the one who was playing around with a dragon:

"His name is Norbert!"

"Aww," the blonde cooed. "Does Potty miss the scaly brute?"

"Hey, at least he had more manners than you, Malfoy, and that was while he kept trying to burn things!"

"Well, I-"

"What was that?" Potter ignored Draco's indignation, and looked around wildly. He was staring off into the misty darkness, eyes wide.

Draco couldn't care less what the boy was afraid of. He was just as bad as Longbottom! "Are you even listening, Potter? I'm not finished with you-"

"Shut up!" the boy hissed, taking cautious steps forward.

"Don't you tell me to-"

A small hand slapped over Draco's mouth, halting his speech. He tried to yell at Potter in outrage, but was silenced when he peered into the clearing up ahead.

Potter released Draco and crept towards the shining silver carcass on the ground. He started to wipe his hand off on his robes before he stopped in shock. Draco held no such qualms as he spat on the ground. Yuck, he hoped Potter wasn't contagious. He only looked up when he heard a cry of surprise.

Freezing, Draco watched in horror as a cloaked figure practically slithered over the ground, it's black cloak sliding over the dead unicorn. The stranger glanced toward both boys as though sensing



their presence, and Draco caught a glimpse of a shadowed face, only showing a mouth dripping with silver blood as it curved up in a sinister smile.

As Potter fell backwards, clutching his head in pain, the figure loomed over them both. Faced with the danger of a truly dark creature, Draco did the only thing he could think of. Only sparing a brief glance in Potter's direction, Draco dropped the lantern, barely registering as it shattered on the ground, and ran for all he was worth, screaming bloody murder.

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Okay, so it wasn't one of Draco's most dignified moments, but he wasn't about to stick around and suffer the consequences. At least his shouting, combined with Fang's howls (even the dog was smart enough to save his own hide), had been enough to alert the giant and the two Gryffindors. They had probably roused every other creature in the forest as well, but Draco hadn't much cared at the time. He had only wanted to be out of there, and as far away from that *thing* as possible.

Potter had survived, unfortunately. He turned up riding on a bloody centaur of all things. Afterwards, the shaken first years were escorted back to the castle and told to get to bed. As if anyone could sleep after that!

Draco didn't know about the Gryffindors, but he stayed up for several hours, not able to shut his eyes without seeing a flash of that blood-soaked grin. For the next several days, he wondered about the strange figure. There was no doubt that they had been killing off the unicorns to drink their blood, but why was still a mystery.

As a child, Draco had been tutored in many things by his father, most not even legal, such as the Dark Arts. He knew that unicorn blood was a powerful substance, and coveted in dark rituals. However, it was something few dared to acquire. Even the thickest of wizards knew that to kill a unicorn was a crime against nature. Sure, their tail hair and horns were used in some potions, not to mention wands, but they were never killed for any purpose. To actually drink their

blood ensured that you would be cursed for all eternity. He could only imagine what kind of being would be desperate enough to do so...

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Hallie Potter couldn't decide where things went so wrong. Perhaps it was when she and her friends first began to pursue the issue of the third-floor corridor? They were such nosy little buggers... Or maybe it was when she found herself firmly convinced that Snape was trying to kill her? Well, he might have been at some point, but he was never after the Stone. Hey, she could even attribute her current situation to that first step into the Leaky Cauldron. They do say curiosity killed the cat. Maybe she would have been better off as a Muggle.

*(Gasp) 'Someone help!'*

Of course, the most likely cause of her distress could be when she convinced her two best friends that three first year Gryffindors were perfectly capable of taking on a psychotic Dark Wizard. After all, somebody had to, and not only was Dumbledore M.I.A., but McGonagall had completely ignored them. That was why they broke into the forbidden corridor by themselves, and defeated every obstacle they came across. They were doing pretty well for a bunch of kids.

*(Cough) 'Can't breathe...'*

Then there was her stupid idea of continuing on alone. There hadn't been enough potion to get them both through, but couldn't she have just gone with Hermione for help? No, Hallie had to reassure the other girl that she would be just fine, nothing to worry about. If she could bounce killing curses off her forehead at one, who's to say she couldn't do it again? She really hoped she never had to test that theory.

*(Wheeze) 'Is it getting darker...?'*

Ah, wait. Hallie knew exactly where it all went wrong. There was really only one person to blame for the danger she was currently in: herself. If she hadn't been so stubborn and reckless about rescuing that stupid stone, getting rid of Voldemort, and saving the whole bloody world... Maybe Snape was right about her having a hero complex. Greasy git.

The grasp around her throat loosened for a moment, before tightening all the more. *'What's that burning smell...?'*

Hallie clutched desperately at the hands around her neck, struggling to stay conscious. Of all the people she'd had to confront, it was her un-stuttering Defense professor, who just happened to have a parasitic Dark Lord on the back of his head. The Weasley twins had wondered all year about that turban of his. The popular student opinion was that Quirrell kept it filled with garlic to ward off vampires, hence the pungent odor. To think, he was actually covering up You-Know-Who's horrendous features instead. Now why didn't anyone think of that? Her life was just so screwed up.

Hallie had retrieved the Sorcerer's Stone from the Mirror of Erised, although she wasn't quite sure how. One minute, her female appearance was reflected, pale and shaking. The next, it stood up straight and gave a conspiratorial wink, before showing her the blood red gem stowed in its pocket. Suddenly, Hallie had a small rock in the side of her pants, and a crazed dead guy screaming for Quirrell to kill her. Hallie tried to make a run for it with the Stone, hoping she could get back through the fire without incinerating herself. Too bad she tripped halfway to the exit.

Then it was only a matter of time before he had her trapped. Quirrell had raised his wand, preparing to utter a curse, before Voldemort warned him against it. He didn't want a repeat experience, after all. Instead, the insane wizard had grabbed her around the neck, and proceeded to hold her two feet off the ground as her legs kicked uselessly. She had actually come close to kneeing him in the groin, though. If only his robes hadn't gotten in the way...

While Quirrell was choking off her air supply, Hallie could hear him yelling in fear to his master. What did he have to worry about? She was the one suffocating! He seemed to think she had hexed him or something, which didn't make any sense at all to Hallie. All she could feel was the burning in her lungs and the stabbing pain of her scar. There was also an odd tingle all over her skin. It wasn't exactly unpleasant, but the charm around her neck was humming as well. In all her time wearing it, she couldn't recall any type of reaction coming from it...

"HARRY!"

'What? Who's that...?' Hallie felt the air rush back into her lungs as the person strangling her was thrown aside. There was a breeze of warm air, a crackle of magic, and Hallie was falling. Dimly, she registered that her body never hit the cold stone floor. At that point, she was too tired to care, and as her world faded to oblivion, the last thing her eyes glimpsed was a blur of white, and two bright blue eyes twinkling with worry...

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Quirinius Quirrell was not a particularly brave man by anyone's standards. However, he was not nearly as cowardly as many of his colleagues presumed. The dramatic stutter he had spoken in all year was feigned, but the constant tremble of his limbs was not. That was a side-effect of being subjected to the *Cruciatius Curse* on a regular basis. But Quirrell did not dare argue with his master. He knew he deserved everything he got for failing to kill that blasted Potter boy.

Little more than a year ago, Quirrell had come upon his master in the deepest parts of the Albanian forest, where he had set out on another of his righteous quests to rid the world of Dark creatures. He had feared the shade of the Dark Lord at first, actually going so far as to attempt a Spirit Banishing Charm. It had little to no affect on his lord, and Quirrell was shown the error of his ways immediately. After all, no one attacked Lord Voldemort without suffering severely in turn.

Once Quirrell had regained full use of his wits a few days later, the Dark Lord had spoken to him. He had made the poor excuse for a wizard realize just how pathetic his existence was. Hunting vampires and werewolves was a waste of time when they would only repopulate in a fortnight. Why bother killing zombies and Lethifolds for villages that couldn't even protect themselves? Why was he wasting his life teaching the whining children of filth and blood traitors under the measly pay of Albus Dumbledore? His master taught Quirrell that there was so much more he could accomplish once he gave up the fruitless endeavor to purge the wizarding world of so-called 'evil.' There was no good and evil, only power.

His part in his master's plans began by trying to steal the Sorcerer's Stone from Gringotts. With his knew-found knowledge of Dark magic, Quirrell was the first wizard to ever break through the goblins'

protections and escape successfully. Unfortunately, the Stone had been moved to the moved to a new location: Hogwarts. Luckily, the old fool had been convinced that it would be safer to have each teacher participate in the protection. Quirrell knew he could get by anything his colleagues came up with when the time was right.

Without the Stone, Quirrell had to find another way to sustain his master. Lord Voldemort could live off the life energy of others for a time, but without another source, he would eventually kill his host, namely Quirrell. So he began hunting through the forest on the edge of the grounds, attacking the unicorns, one by one, and drinking their blood. To do so would leave Quirrell cursed for all eternity, so the tales said, but his master told him it was of no consequence. Once he was back to full power, nothing would stand in his way.

Quirrell's second task bestowed upon him by his master was to put an end to the Boy-Who-Lived, Harry Potter. The child had just started Hogwarts, and it was the perfect opportunity to get him out of the way before he learned to defend himself. It would have to be done before the school year ended, though, and Potter went back into hiding under the Headmaster's protections.

His first attempt wasn't even planned. He had let a troll loose in the school in the hopes that, while the rest of the staff was distracted, he could sneak off to the third-floor corridor. Snape ruined that idea by heading him off, and Potter got lucky with the troll. After that, he was under Snape's constant scrutiny, and his master was in a foul temper.

His second attempt was at the boy's first Quidditch match. He managed to jinx Potter's broom to try and throw him off, putting an end to the boy once and for all, and making it all look like an accident. Snape foiled that plot, too, by chanting a counter spell. Quirrell might have still succeeded if Granger hadn't plowed him over in her misguided attempt to stop Snape.

As the months passed, Quirrell did not get another chance at the boy, but he did make progress on his master's other plans. He had already discovered how to get by the half-giant's mutt by getting him drunk, and the other protections were child's play. Did they really believe that a giant chess board and some flying keys would be enough to

stop Lord Voldemort? Fools. Snape's riddle was taken care of easily enough, as well. It was only Dumbledore's final trick that he had to worry about.

It wasn't until the end of the school year that Quirrell found his chance. His master was getting impatient, and he'd already been threatened by Snape. Whose side was that man on anyway? Certainly not their master's. It was simple enough to lure Dumbledore out of the school with a false missive from the ministry. Fudge was always badgering the old man for assistance, so an owl every now and then was not unusual. He headed down the trapdoor that night, blasting his way through the majority of the protections rather than wasting precious time. He was pacing in front of Dumbledore's mirror after finding no easy solution to it when Potter appeared.

The boy had been shocked by his presence, while Quirrell attempted to conceal his own surprise. He really should have expected the brat to try something sooner or later. Potter was actually expecting Snape to be after the Stone; the very man who had been protecting the boy all year! He corrected Potter, and then removed that absurd turban at his master's behest. Even turned away from Potter, he couldn't miss the gasp of horror when the Boy-Who-Lived first laid eyes on the Dark Lord.

Quirrell was eager to kill the boy already, but his master whispered that Potter could be of use. He pushed the boy forward until he was facing the tall mirror. Nothing happened for a moment, and Quirrell prodded the boy to speak. Potter tried to lie to his master, and a convincing one at that, but Lord Voldemort was not deceived. He ordered Potter to hand over the stone in his pocket, and the foolish boy tried to run.

Potter was soon in his grasp, and he wrapped his hands around the delicate throat eagerly, wanting to finish the nuisance for ever disobeying his master. He wanted to see the boy's breathing slow, feel the frightened pulse sputter. Quirrell was struck by a wave of pain, however, when his fingers came into contact with the boy's skin. He screamed in agony, and begged his master for answers. What kind of magic was this? He could not kill the boy if it kept up.

His master urged him to continue, and Potter himself struggled, oblivious to anything but the force obstructing his windpipe. So Quirrell persevered, strangling the boy even as he felt the nerves of his palms blister and smoke. The burning sensation began to spread up his arms, and through his chest, but Quirrell ignored it in favor of watching the boy's struggles grow weaker. His head was pounding, and his vision blurred, a combination of the strange magics, and his master's own fury.

Suddenly, something about the boy changed. Other than the *Avada Kedavra* green glow that had enveloped his body at Quirrell's first touch, a golden shimmer started on his chest. From out of nowhere, a brilliant red gem hanging on a silver chain appeared around his neck, dangling right underneath Quirrell's bony wrists. He dimly recognized some kind of Visibility Charm undoing.

The green and gold identified two different spells on the boy, and both were warring with each other as their host grew limp. Tiny sparks began to shoot off the small body, singing holes in Quirrell's robe, and the fire in his veins doubled in intensity. He fought to hold onto consciousness, just a little longer...

The charm around Potter's neck glowed brighter, and with a blinding flash, the ruby gem cracked down the middle. When the spots cleared from his eyes, Quirrell felt his blood run impossibly cold, even with the magic searing through his body, and the feeling of his bones slowly turning to ash.

"What kind of trickery is this?" He rasped as he found himself choking a small *girl* who bore a strong resemblance to Potter. Her long ebony hair fell down her back, and the neck under his melting fingers was even thinner. He saw a pale face gone slack, and emerald eyes fluttering shut. Quirrell could not understand what was going on. Where was Harry Potter? Who was this girl? But then he saw it. Peeking out from under her tousled bangs was a lightning bolt scar that burned an angry red. Even as he watched, a dribble of scarlet slid down the jagged mark.

"MASTER-!"



But Quirinius Quirrell never had the chance to finish his warning. At that moment, two things happened. The first was the timely arrival of Albus Dumbledore as he strode into the hall, worry and anger battling across his aged features.

He lifted his wand, twilight robes billowing in a nonexistent wind, and bellowed, "*STUPEFY!*"

Quirrell was blown backward, finally releasing the girl, who at that moment, sucked in a small breath of air.

The second thing that happened as Quirrell flew through the air, ignored by the powerful wizard who scooped up the injured child, was that the love of Lily Potter completed its duty, and sent the man who had dared to harm her daughter up in flames. Quirrell's body disintegrated, becoming no more than dust on the wind, and the evil spirit of Lord Voldemort fled, unaware of the momentous occurrence of the last five minutes, and once more vowing revenge on the Boy-Who-Lived.

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Hermione Granger paced back and forth in her dressing gown, nearly tearing out her frizzy brown hair with worry. Rather than walk in a straight line across the small, confined room, she was forced to deviate her path every few feet to maneuver around the massive paws of the unconscious Cerberus that Dumbledore had, thankfully, had the presence of mind to put in a bewitched sleep before he jumped down the trapdoor. Fluffy laid on its side, twitching in sleep, and heads resting in a puddle of drool caused by the middle one.

Ronald Weasley sat down on the floor against a wall, his freckles paler than usual, and holding a bloody handkerchief pressed to the lump on his head as he watched his friend with bemusement.

"Mione, take a break already! You're making me dizzy just watching you!"

Hermione paused for moment, and glanced down at Ron, wearing an expression caught between annoyance and fear.

"I can't take a break! Harry could be dying! I can't believe I just left him down there alone- What was I thinking? If only I had convinced him to come back with us, or just knocked him out instead if he wouldn't see reason... Now Harry is up against You-Know-Who, and who knows what else, and we're not there to help him-" her voice cracked with tears but she continued, resuming her pacing mid-rant.

"I'm sure Harry will be fine! Dumbledore would never let anything happen to him!"

"But what if-"

Ron stopped listening at that point, knowing she would only repeat herself. It wasn't that he didn't care- He was probably more scared for his friend than he could ever remember being. He was just better at holding it in for Hermione's sake. The truth was that they didn't know if Harry would come out of this alive- But he just had to! Ron couldn't bear the thought of the smaller boy getting hurt. Sometimes, Ron just had this insane urge to look out for Harry, like he was a younger brother, even though Harry was probably the last person who would need saving. He really was a hero, even if he hated being thought of as one. But more than that, Harry was his best friend.

Ron thought back to when he had first regained consciousness in the ruins of the giant chessboard with a panicked Hermione shaking him awake. She had filled him in on the situation as they grabbed brooms from the flying key room. He was terrified to hear that Harry had gone on without them and had yet to return. He flew at top speed with Hermione, past the Devil's Snare, and struggling to ignore the way his vision still blurred from the hit he had taken. He was sure that the queen had given him a concussion.

Ron would never feel the same about Wizards' Chess again. Maybe Hermione was right all those times she had called the game barbaric. He would never be able to slaughter Harry in a match again without wincing in sympathy for the fragile chessmen.

After coming out of the trapdoor, Ron had nearly had his head bitten off by an irate Fluffy. The dog did not appreciate so many intrusions in one night. Luckily, Hermione had come out a moment later and hit

the beast with a Jelly Legs Jinx. It distracted the dog long enough for them to run out into the safety of the corridor.

Hermione led the way then, even if she had no real idea of where the Headmaster could be. They only hoped that he was back from whatever errand he had run at the ministry. McGonagall was next on the list of possible teachers who could help, with Hagrid as a last resort. At the very least, he could calm Fluffy down.

In the end, they needn't have worried. They literally ran into Dumbledore himself as he flew up the main staircase with much more energy than a man his age should have. He had taken one look at the frantic Gryffindors, and stated more than asked that Harry had gone after the Stone. After barely a nod in answer, he had run off once more, forcing Ron and Hermione to double back the way they came.

Dumbledore had burst into the room, the two children hot on his tail. Ron was already anticipating another battle with Fluffy, but was stunned when the three-headed dog leapt at Dumbledore like an overgrown puppy, and panted happily as the old man scratched one of its heads. Giving the dog one last pat, Dumbledore flicked his wand, knocking it out, and jumped down the trapdoor without a backward glance.

That was at least twenty minutes ago, and Ron and Hermione were still waiting. The suspense was becoming unbearable for both of them, and Ron was just starting to contemplate going down there himself. At least they still had the brooms...

He wondered what was going down there anyway. Had Snape gotten the Stone yet, or was Harry fending him off? On the positive side, maybe Dumbledore would finally fire the snarky Potions Master. Plotting murder had to qualify for something.

Just then, the trapdoor swung open, thumping loudly against the floor. Hermione froze in the middle of the room, and Ron leaned forward from the wall. Dumbledore's tall, pointed wizard hat was the first thing they saw, rising from the darkness as he levitated himself out. Ron was just wondering whether their friend would follow, when Hermione gave a cry of distress and ran forward.

"Harry!"

Cradled in the old wizard's arms was a small bundle in tattered pajamas with a mop of dark hair. Ron jumped up from his seat, nearly falling down again when his head injury gave an unpleasant twinge.

The two distraught Gryffindors reached Dumbledore and watched his worried eyes widen for no reason. He seemed to be having an inner debate with himself as he tightened his hold on their friend. But then the twinkle in his eyes returned just as Hermione reached to pull the boy into a hug.

*'Wait... that's not...'*

Hermione shrieked, her arms falling back to her sides as she stared at Harry in disbelief. Ron glanced at her in confusion before turning back to Dumbledore. He met the bright blue eyes for a moment, and then looked down at Harry...

"BLOODY HELL!"

Ron stumbled back in shock, actually landing on the sleeping Fluffy, not that he noticed. Fluffy snorted and pulled its paw from under him, causing Ron to hit the floor. Hermione began to stare at the figure with a look of realization. Ron just gaped before locking gazes with her. He blurted out the only thing that made sense to him.

"You-Know-Who turned Harry into a girl!"

A second later he clutched his stinging arm and glared at Hermione. "What was that for?" he grumbled as she retracted her hand from the hit she had delivered.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "You're an idiot," she explained simply, turning her back on his indignant face to question Dumbledore.

"As much as I would like to give you the answers you no doubt desire Miss Granger, Mr. Weasley," Dumbledore interrupted gently, "why don't we get her up to the hospital wing first?"

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Hallie groaned. She wasn't quite sure where she was. She only knew that it *hurt*. Her limbs felt like limp noodles, and the pressure behind her eyes was unbearable. Hallie's mind was running unusually slow, and she struggled to remember, well, anything from before.

*'Let's see...' she thought, 'I was visiting Hagrid, and we talked about Fluffy... Oh, yeah! And then McGonagall said... and Snape showed up, rotten timing as always... Then we went down the trapdoor last night... Right. Stupidest thing I've ever done... So, what happened?'*

Hallie felt her fingers twitch against fabric. She scrunched up her nose, and finally managed to pry her eyelids apart... Only to see white. Lots and lots of white.

"Am I dead?" she croaked.

"Not at all, Miss Potter, although you did come rather close. You've been in the hospital wing for three days already. We were starting to think you would never wake up."

Hallie blinked and turned her head. Her view was slightly restricted by a mountain of sweets, but behind that she was able to make out the headmaster sitting down.

Seeing her bewildered gaze, he addressed the candy first, "Ah, yes, those would be from your many admirers."

Hallie raised an eyebrow. Since when did people start sending her gifts? She winced when she noticed a particularly garish-looking package covered in hearts. *'Gotta do something about those fan girls...'*

Dumbledore elaborated. "What happened between you and Professor Quirrell was kept in the utmost confidence... So, obviously, the entire school knows. I believe you've gained quite a following. If your name didn't carry some weight before, you now have the respect of a few of the upper years, as well."

Would the hero worship never end? "I hate being the Boy-Who-Lived..." Hallie groaned.

"On the contrary, Hallie," Dumbledore smiled genially, but something about his expression had taught her to brace herself. "At the moment, I think the term would be Girl-Who-Lived, or maybe Child? Or young woman? Or perhaps witch, although I suppose that may be a bit redundant..."

As the old man rambled off topic, Hallie's eyes grew wide with shock. She glanced down at her lap, finding two small, feminine hands. They flew up to her face, tracing the rounder features with shock. She trembled slightly when she realized the amulet was gone. Hallie didn't know whether to feel relieved, or worried. She settled on panic.

"What happened? Where's my necklace? How- Do they all know? What about my friends? Did anyone explain to them- What if they hate me-"

"Hush, child," Dumbledore placed a wrinkled hand on her shoulder to calm her down. "The majority of the school is not aware of your disguise. Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger are the exception. They know you are a girl, but I have left it up to you to tell them the rest."

Hallie gaped. "But how did they find out? And why am I a girl again? Where's the charm?"

"When I brought you out of the trapdoor, the glamour had already dissipated. Your friends were waiting for our return, and were quite worried to think you were harmed. I'm afraid I wasn't quite quick enough to hide you from sight before they found out..."

Dumbledore spoke innocently, but Hallie held back the urge to roll her eyes. *'Yeah, right. He probably let them know on purpose! Meddling old man...'* For some reason, Hallie didn't know whether to hex him or hug him. *'At least I don't have to lie to them anymore...'*

"During your battle with Quirrell, the amulet was damaged rather badly. He discovered what you are, but was unable to tell anyone. He is dead."

Hallie didn't feel any remorse for the man who had tried to kill her, but it was still a shock to hear that she had murdered someone.

As if he knew what she was thinking, Dumbledore said sharply, "You are not responsible for his death. Lord Voldemort had been draining Quirrell's life force for some time. When his weakened spirit fled, he left his servant to die. It is unlikely that we could have saved him before sending him off to prison."

She nodded with her eyes down, and decided to change the subject, "What about my necklace? How did it break? I thought the spells would only fade if I took it off?"

"That is true, but it was the backlash of your own magic battling Quirrell's that destroyed it. I'm afraid I overestimated my spellwork. The two forces were more than the gem could handle, and it cracked. I believe it was also, in part, your mother's protection as well."

"My mum?" Hallie asked in a weak voice.

"Yes, the night Lord Voldemort tried to kill you, it was her sacrifice that provided a counter-curse to the *Avada Kedavra*. It is also that lasting protection that wards the home of your mother's blood, Petunia."

She winced at the mention of her aunt. Truthfully, Hallie had been dreading her return to Privet Drive. She hadn't actually had any contact with the Dursleys since she ran away from the zoo. However, Vernon was well-practiced at holding grudges, and she did not look forward to seeing him again.

She had known since the start of the year that Dumbledore had sent them a letter 'to reassure them of her whereabouts so they wouldn't worry.' As if her relatives hadn't thought her a freak before, she could only imagine what they were thinking now that she was a witch. Of course, her aunt should have had ten years to cope with the knowledge, having already known- news that left Hallie fuming- but her uncle was another story. She almost wished she could have been there to see Petunia trying to explain *that* side of her family to him.

"Your mother's love also saved you against Lord Voldemort," Dumbledore continued with a wistful tone. It was obvious her parents' death meant something to him as well. "While carrying his taint, Quirrell could not bare to touch your very skin. It must have caused him massive amounts of pain just to hold you as long as he did."

"He wasn't the only one hurting..." Hallie muttered. Raising her voice, she asked, "Professor, could I... could I ask you something?"

"You just have, but go ahead," he smiled, just as he began digging through Hallie's get-well cards.

"Well, I was wondering- Er, what are you doing?" Hallie was distracted when the man pulled out a small bag and grimaced.

"I was hoping for some lemon drops, but alas, all I can find are Bertie Botts," Dumbledore sighed dramatically. "I came across a bogie flavored one in my youth, and I haven't quite trusted them since. But perhaps," he said, pulling a small cream-colored one out, "I will be safe with a nice toffee."

He popped it into his mouth, and Hallie bit her lip to keep from saying anything. She happened to know exactly what flavor that one was, having eaten it during Christmas break. Suffice to say, she'd lost her affinity for Bertie Botts, too.

The great Albus Dumbledore gagged and spit it back out, "Earwax..."

Hallie giggled before remembering her question. "Oh, um..."

"Please continue, my dear," he said comfortingly, "I will try to answer your query to the best of my ability."

She nodded, and made sure to look the old wizard in the eye. "Why did he want to kill me? Voldemort, I mean. Down there, he said that he tried to spare my mum... and he wanted me to join him..."

Dumbledore looked solemn at hearing that. However, instead of elaborating, he apologized. "I'm sorry, Hallie, but I'm afraid I cannot answer that. You have asked me the one thing that I do not believe you are ready to hear."

*'What is he hiding...?'* Hallie wondered, but she knew he wouldn't say anything more. Deciding that arguing would be pointless, she asked another question. "And what about the stone? How is it I got it out of the mirror?"



"Ah, now that I am happy to answer," Dumbledore twinkled. "It was one of my more brilliant ideas, if I do say so myself. Only one who desired to find the stone- find it, not use it- only then could they retrieve it."

"Oh! So, that's why Quirrell couldn't take it... I was actually getting kinda desperate back there. All I could think of was that I needed to get the stone away from him... But what happened to it? I remember I had it in my hand- But I might have dropped it! I can't remember-"

"You needn't worry, the stone is safe. It has been decided that the Sorcerer's Stone is much too powerful an object if it were to fall into the hands of one such as Voldemort. We have taken the proper measures to have it destroyed-"

"What! But what about the Flamels? They'll die!" Hallie blurted out, not understanding how they could just end their own lives like that.

"Ah, that is unfortunately true," Dumbledore agreed softly. "But Nicolas and Perenelle have been around for a long time, child. They have just enough elixir stored to get their affairs in order. Then, yes, they will die. However, I have always said that to the well-organized mind, death is but the next great adventure..."

Hallie would never quite understand Dumbledore's reasoning, but if death was an adventure, then she was hoping for a nice, boring life. After all, there was no way second year could compare to her first at Hogwarts.

Hallie Potter was in for one hell of a surprise.

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Hallie was nervous. No, not just nervous, she was ready to bolt. She was currently contemplating just how far she could make it to bathroom and out the window, regardless of the long drop, before the nurse caught her out of bed. She just wanted to be as far away as possible before Madam Pomfrey returned with Ron and Hermione. Most people were not terrified of their best friends. Hallie Potter was not most people. When the two Gryffindors walked hesitantly through the double doors, Hallie wanted only to crawl under the hospital bed and die.

*'Oh, no, what am I going to say to them? How much do they already know? What if they hate me? I've been hiding from them all year long-'*

"Harry?" Hermione's timid voice called, and Hallie restrained herself from pulling up the sheet to cover her face.

Both Ron and Hermione walked forward, not taking their eyes off the unfamiliar girl. Ron's eyes were wide as saucers, while Hermione wore a calculating expression.

"Mate," Ron was the first to speak, "is that really you?"

Hallie shrugged half-heartedly, "Yeah, it's me."

"Well, uh, you look different," Ron's blunt statement eased some of the tension. Hermione snorted and Hallie ducked down to hide an amused smile.

*'Same old Ron. Leave it to him to state the obvious.'*

"So, what's going on, Harry? Or is that even your name?"

The girl winced. "No, actually it's Hallie. Hallie Potter. Harry doesn't exist."

Hermione still managed to look startled, even though she must have figured it out by then. "You mean-"

"I am the so-called 'Boy' Who Lived, but my parents hid that I was a girl."

"Why would they do that?" Ron asked, taking a seat by her bed. He seemed a little wary of his friend, but was trying to get all the answers first.

"According to Dumbledore," Hallie explained, "they made up a phony identity incase something ever happened. They were going to send me to some friends, another wizarding family, if things got too dangerous. Guess they didn't have the chance, though," she added, slightly bitter.

"So, no one knew the truth?" Hermione frowned, thinking.

"Only Dumbledore, and my relatives, I guess. It was his idea, actually, to have me pretend I was a boy. He thought it would be safer."

"I suppose he was right." Hermione always was one to agree with authority. "The wizarding world was expecting Harry Potter... and this way, no one would recognize you outside of school. You could walk right through Diagon Alley, and no one would know their hero was in plain sight..."

*'Damn, she's quick.'*

"This does explain a lot, though," Hermione added offhandedly.

"What do you mean? What does it explain?" Ron looked flustered.

"Well, I have had my suspicions..."

"What suspicions?" He stared at her, getting increasingly frustrated.

Hallie turned to ease her hotheaded friend before he exploded. "She thought I was gay, Ron."

Ron gaped at Hallie, then burst out laughing. He leaned back in his chair and was nearly gasping for breath.

Hermione had the grace to look sheepish, before she said, "Yes, well, I hadn't considered that you weren't a boy! It just seemed like the most reasonable explanation! You always were a bit brighter than most of the boys in our year-"

Her eyes drifted towards Ron as she said that, and he stopped laughing with an indignant shout.

"Hey!"

"You've always seemed more sensitive, too-"

"You know, Hermione's right!" Ron gasped, sitting up abruptly.

"Isn't she always?" Hallie pointed out wryly.

"Yeah, well, most of the time," Ron stumbled. "But I can't believe I didn't see it sooner!" He tapped his chin thoughtfully. "I mean, you never did change clothes in front of any of us, you were always hiding behind the bed curtains... and you were always saying weird things, stuff I've only heard my sister say, like that time I called Hermione a-"

Ron saw Hermione's darkening expression and rushed to the point. "- Er, and you called me an insensitive prick!"

While Hallie blushed at memory of her outburst the morning before the troll incident, Hermione was growing teary-eyed. Glancing over at her bushy-haired friend, Hallie was startled when the girl practically leapt onto the hospital bed, and pulled her into a suffocating hug.

"Uh, 'Mione?" Hallie squeaked, out of breath.

"Oh, you really said that?" Hermione asked. "You're such a good friend, Har- er, Hallie!"

Ron took one look at Hallie's panicked face as she awkwardly patted the crying girl and sniggered.

"At least we know you're not a total girl. You're just as lost as the rest of us guys, eh, mate?"

Hallie glared playfully at him, before offering up a pleading look. Mouthing over Hermione's shoulder, she said, "Save me, and I'll share my get-well presents!"

Ron took a second to drool over the mountain of Honey Dukes before he pulled Hermione back into her chair. He then started digging through the stuff. As he searched, he mentioned with his head half buried, "You know, I think the twins tried to send you a toilet seat. Looks like Pomfrey confiscated it, though."

While Ron ripped open a box of licorice wands, Hermione leaned forward curiously, still wiping away a few hormonal tears. "So, does this mean you're going to become a girl again, Hallie?"

Ron paused in mid-bite to hear her answer. Hallie suddenly became very interested in the white bed sheets.

"Well... no. Dumbledore thinks I should stay 'Harry' Potter for a while longer, and I kind of agree."

"What!"

"Why?"

Hallie sighed, "I mean, it would be a bit of a shock if I left the infirmary looking like this," she gestured by picking up a strand of her long black hair. Then she grinned toward the redhead. "Besides, who knows what kind of rumors the students would come up with. We wouldn't want them all to draw the same conclusions as Ron here."

She snickered, remembering how Dumbledore had mentioned Ron's comment on his way out. She had been badgering him for answers about her friends' reactions, when he had suddenly remembered a faculty meeting that he was late for. Hallie wondered how Snape was taking the news that the Potter heir had survived the odds once more... Hallie sighed at the thought, *'There goes the rest of Gryffindor's points for breaking rules and attacking teachers. We can kiss the house cup good-bye.'*

Hermione was laughing at Hallie's allusion, and quipped, "Of course, You-Know-Who's ultimate revenge: to turn the Boy-Who-Lived into a girl!"

It was too much for the girls, who burst into giggles, leaning on each other to stay upright. Ron's ears were beet red, and he exclaimed in his defense, "Hey, cut me some slack, I had a concussion!"

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The three friends spent the next hour simply catching up, despite Madam Pomfrey's many threats to evict them so her patient could rest. All it took were a few set of puppy eyes from Hallie, which didn't actually work, to a threat to sneak out of the wing, which didn't work either, and finally a resigned promise to behave, which at least gave them ten more minutes.

Ron and Hermione were using the time to reacquaint themselves with their friend's new appearance. It was difficult at first, and both felt as though they were meeting her for the first time. But after a while, they

realized that it was still the same 'Harry' that they had known all along. For Hermione, she saw this as the perfect opportunity to bond with a female friend other than Parvati and Lavender. For Ron, it was still kind of disturbing to realize that a girl had been sleeping in his dorm. He would probably take a while to get over that...

Hallie was enjoying herself more than she had all year. For the first time in months, she felt like she could really be herself, and she was no longer tied down by the burden of guilt for deceiving her best friends.

They had moved their discussion to her bed, just managing to fit all three first years, with Hallie and Hermione side by side, and Ron on his stomach at the end. They were also surrounded by a surprisingly large amount of candy wrappers, courtesy of Ron. Hallie filled them in on her confrontation with Voldemort, and the other two, in turn, told her about everything she had missed while asleep.

Apparently, the rumor mill was working overtime once word spread that a magical stone capable of turning anything into gold and producing the elixir of life had been guarded at their school, and stuttering Professor Quirrell had tried to steal it. Hallie noticed that Dumbledore had neglected to tell the school about Voldemort's part in it all, but she supposed it was for the best. The students were also aware that the three previously outcast Gryffindors, who were stupid enough to lose half of their house's points in one night, had saved the day. They also knew that Harry Potter had gone after the bad guy, and was injured in the process.

On the headmaster's orders, all visitors had been restricted from the hospital wing, and everyone was curious as to how bad off she could be. The Hufflepuffs were saying that Harry Potter was victim to a babbling curse, and had yet to speak in anything but Pig Latin. The Ravenclaws thought the whole thing exaggerated, and she was only trying to skive off on classwork. The Slytherins were telling anyone who would listen, and most who preferred not to, that Potter was actually dead, and the teachers were trying to stall until they could bring in a Doppelganger. The Gryffindors retaliated by trying to hex the Slytherins on sight, and they claimed that Potter had survived a

brutal duel, nearly losing a limb, but would make a miraculous recovery any day now.

Hallie now knew that the wizarding populace was just plain stupid.

The conversation had drifted to classes, and the History of Magic test that Hermione was adamant Hallie study for, when Madam Pomfrey called that time was up.

"That's it! Out, you two!" she screeched, and Ron jumped down from the trash-covered bed guiltily. "I've allowed you enough time as it is. Miss Potter needs to rest if she wants to be out of here any time soon!"

Hermione hugged Hallie one last time after getting up, and Ron gave her a gruff pat on the back.

"Get well soon, Hallie! I'll make sure to bring your homework with me in the morning! Oh, and those notes on the third Goblin rebellion!"

Hallie nodded, biting back a groan. Then she smiled more genuinely and addressed them both, "Thanks again, you guys... You know, for not giving up on me..."

Hermione and Ron paused at the foot of her bed, and Hallie swallowed back tears.

"I really am sorry for not telling you. It's just-"

She didn't get to finish. Both of her friends tackled her in a hug, even Ron, who wasn't normally one for emotional displays, clung to her tightly.

In the doorway of the nurse's office, Madam Pomfrey sighed, and mentally added another five minutes.

"Don't worry, Hallie, we understand," Hermione sniffed.

Ron grinned at her, "Yeah, and you're still my best mate. What kind of friend would I be if I abandoned you for a little thing like a gender switch?"

Hallie gave a weak laugh, her eyes shining.

"But seriously," Ron joked, "are there any more secrets you're not telling us?"

She sobered immediately, and Ron grew worried. Hermione also sat back to watch Hallie's sudden serious face.

"Well, there is one more thing..." she whispered.

They leaned in closer to hear.

"My parents weren't really James and Lily Potter, and I'm actually the illegitimate child of Professor Snape after he had an affair with a muggle fortune teller, and they were forced to give me up when she predicted that the world would end if I became a Slytherin, so I went to the Potters who actually thought I was a boy and had their memories modified to think it was all true!" she said in a rush without stopping for breath.

Ron yelped once the words reached his brain, and fell off the edge of the bed. Hermione was staring at Hallie in pure shock.

Hallie took a moment to savor their matching expressions of horror, before a snicker escaped her clamped lips. Her cheeks turned red from the effort of holding it back. Hermione narrowed her eyes at Hallie suspiciously. Another giggle broke free, then full out laughter.

Ron's face poked up from the floor, glaring at her. "Oy, are you trying to give me a heart attack, mate?"

"Sorry, Ron," Hallie apologized, still trying to catch her breath, "but I couldn't resist."

"It's alright... but you were just kidding, right?"

Silence.

"RIGHT?"



Hallie started laughing again, and this time Hermione joined in at Ron's expense. She buried her head in a pillow to muffle the sounds.

Ron glanced between his two hysterical friends, and muttered to himself, "Girls."

Hermione finally calmed down, and glanced at Hallie bemusedly, "How in the world did you come up with all that, anyway?"

"I've had a lot of free time on my hands," Hallie shrugged hopelessly, "I swear, I'm about to go crazy in this place from boredom!"

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"Hey, Dray! Hurry up, or we're going to be late for the feast!"

The aforementioned blonde scowled and put down his quill, subtly tucking the letter to his parents out of sight. Blaise barged into the dorm without so much as knocking, and grinned at his annoyed friend.

"C'mon, Dray! We can't be late for our own victory party! Slytherin has won the house cup for the seventh year in a row!"

Draco scowled, "I thought I told you never to call me that."

"What?" He blinked innocently.

"You know exactly what."

"Oh, do you mean... DRAY!"

The next moment, Blaise ducked a flying textbook aimed for his head.

"Hey! You could have killed me with that!" he gasped in mock outrage, staring down at the battered copy of *Hogwarts a History*. That thing could have taken his head off!

"And that would be such a shame..." Draco muttered, before striding out of the dorm, Blaise right behind him.

As he walked with the boy out of the dungeons, they passed several of their housemates, all wearing triumphant expressions and smirking at random students. The entire house was reveling in the fact that Slytherin would be keeping the house cup for yet another year. Gryffindor had been in the running for a while, but they hadn't stood a chance thanks to the Golden Trio. Even the Weasley twins had never managed to lose that many points in one go!

However, despite the joyous atmosphere, Draco was the only person not caught up in the excitement. He was too preoccupied with the half-finished letter sitting up in his dorm. He had been writing his usual report to his father, who wanted to keep track of Dumbledore's activities. Draco had also hoped to get some answers.

The entire school was aware that the Sorcerer's Stone had been kept at Hogwarts, thanks to a few nosy Hufflepuffs, and that they were now short one Defense teacher. Quirrell had bypassed the stone's protections to try and steal it, but had been killed in the process. And all this was thanks to that blasted Potter.

Draco knew as much as anyone else about what had happened, but to him, something just didn't fit. He seemed to be the only one questioning it, but why would *Quirrell*, of all people, try to rob the castle, and not to mention Gringotts, at one point? Even if the man had been a fake from the start, he was still nowhere near powerful enough to take on someone like Dumbledore.

Being a Malfoy, it was suffice to say that his family was not the shining example of light that the half-wit minister thought they were. Lucius Malfoy had made quite a few dirty dealings in the past, and anyone who believed the Dark Lord would need to put him under the *Imperius Curse* was an idiot. The point, was that Draco's father was well acquainted with several practitioners of the Dark Arts, not to mention himself, so Draco knew what to look for in a powerful wizard. Quirrell may have carried traces of Dark magic, but he was not even close to having the kind of control needed to use it. People like him just didn't attempt stuff like that. At least, not without someone stronger to back them up...

Draco also kept in mind the other odd occurrences that year. Why would Dumbledore hide the stone in a school, for one thing? And why did Quirrell choose now to go after it? Also, he still hadn't forgotten the dead unicorn; who could? Quirrell must have been the one drinking its blood- and that was so not a mental picture he needed- but why? Unicorn blood was supposed to keep you alive, even if you were an inch from death, but had Quirrell been dying? For that matter, wasn't one of the stone's functions the elixir of life... It had to be for the Flamels to still be alive at over six hundred. Even wizards couldn't live *that* long.

It just didn't add up! Draco knew there was something Dumbledore had left out, he just didn't know *what*. He also had a feeling that his father might know something, but whether he would deem it necessary to inform Draco was another matter altogether.

And how in the world did Potter ever get involved? It was obvious that the Gryffindor had decided to involve himself, but why? Was it just his stupid idea of a game? Did the arrogant Boy-Who-Lived think he was invincible or something? How did he survive anyway? Even a pathetic wizard like Quirrell had to know more spells than a first year raised by Muggles. There was no way he would just give up the chance to finish the so-called embodiment of the light.

As Draco took a seat between Crabbe and Goyle in the Great Hall, he kept his expression blank, repressing the scowl that threatened to break out. It wouldn't do to stick out in the middle of his happy housemates. Inwardly sighing, Draco decided to continue his train of thought at another time. All of this was giving him a bloody headache.

Just then, the long-awaited Harry Potter walked into the hall, free at last from his isolation, and in seemingly perfect health. The boy paused inside the doors as the whole of the hall turned their gazes on him. Then a few of his Gryffindor cronies swarmed him, and pulled the grinning hero over to their table.

Draco knew not to expect his headache to go away any time soon. His body barely registered as he turned a burning glare in Potter's direction. It was just habit by now to spend each meal wishing he could walk over there and hex Potter's cheeky smile right off. To think, he still had six years to put up with the Golden Boy... *Argh.*

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Hallie could barely keep to the slow pace that Madam Pomfrey had ordered when she left the hospital wing. She was just so happy to be out of there at last, that she couldn't help but want to take off running incase the nurse suddenly changed her mind.

Madam Pomfrey had been a complete nightmare since Hallie first woke up, and it had nothing to do with getting injured that set the woman off. She was more irritated to learn that Harry Potter was really a girl, and no one had told her. She hadn't exactly agreed with Dumbledore's reasons, either. While the old man was free to avoid the hospital wing until the mediwitch cooled off, Hallie had been forced to listen to all of her tirades, bedridden as she was.

For hours, she had lain there as Pomfrey completed her check up, hearing things like, "Can't believe the nerve of that man... didn't think it necessary to keep me informed of my own patients... could have easily learned the truth from a simple medical scan... completely preposterous... oh, no, it's not like I need to know these sort of things... it's only the students' *lives* that I'm put in charge of!"

It had gotten old fast. At least the nurse hadn't blamed Hallie for Dumbledore's plan. Instead, she had started in on Hallie later for doing something so dangerous as going after evil wizards. Before she let the girl go to the Leaving Feast, she had made her promise not to attempt any more foolish stunts that would land her back in the hospital wing. Hallie had agreed, but she doubted it would happen. After all, she may have missed the final Quidditch game, but next year, nothing was going to stop her from kicking Slytherin's arse.

Now Hallie was on her way to the Great Hall, looking toward the Leaving Feast with some anticipation. On the one hand, she was free of the hospital wing, Voldemort was gone, and her best friends finally knew her secret... On the other, school was over, and Hallie was heading back to another fun-filled summer with the Dursleys. Even in her head, the sarcasm in that statement was beyond obvious.

*'Well,' Hallie sighed, 'might as well make the best of the time I have left...'*

She finally reached the massive wooden doors, and paused to gather her bearings. From inside, she could hear the murmured din of the entire school already seated. Oh, why did she have to leave the infirmary so late?

Hallie took a deep breath, and shook out her arms as though preparing for battle. She also reached up to touch the familiar, and slightly comforting, chain of the necklace. Dumbledore had returned it to her a few hours ago, with a few modifications. It was repaired at last, although the scarlet gem still held a splintering crack down the middle. It couldn't be helped though, as Dumbledore said the jewels were hard to come by.

When the headmaster had returned it to her, he had been jolly as ever, and had happily informed her of the small tweak he had made

in the spells on it. Where as before, Hallie couldn't remove the necklace for anything without unraveling the entire glamour, she could now do so freely. In other words, as she had demonstrated earlier in a mirror, by slipping the necklace over her head, Harry Potter would fade away, returning Hallie, and by putting it back on, the glamour would fade back in. The process was kind of strange to watch, but Hallie was glad for the change. It not only meant that she would be seeing a lot more of her old self, but it also eased some of her worries about the upcoming summer. After all, she couldn't imagine going back to the Dursleys as a boy. Vernon would start ranting about freaks, Petunia would faint, Dudley would laugh, and the neighbors would just be really confused. Okay, it might be funny, but it wasn't worth the time locked in her cupboard as punishment.

After handing her the repaired charm, Dumbledore had reminded her to wear it at all times in the wizarding world, and that it was still possible for it to break. As a parting comment, he had joked with her not to get in any more duels while wearing it.

Bracing herself, Hallie pushed open the heavy doors, glad for whatever magic it was that made that possible for someone her size. As soon as she stepped into the Great Hall, the first thing Hallie noticed were the silver and green banners decorating the walls, and she fought back a sneer. The second thing she noticed were the hundreds of students staring at her in absolute silence. It was uncomfortable, to say the least.

She was, thankfully, rescued a moment later, when several of her friends ran over, all loudly welcoming her back. The Weasley twins took the lead, parting the small crowd of Gryffindors, and leading her away as though they were bodyguards. Hallie laughed at their antics, and took her usual seat between Ron and Hermione, who both greeted her with a wink and a nod when they took in her masculine appearance. Both still seemed a little uncomfortable next to her, though, and tried not to show it in front of their peers. Ron flinched slightly when she bumped into him, and Hermione kicked him under the table.

The students were all seated now, and only waiting for Dumbledore's speech. Ron in particular was grumbling in sync with his stomach as he stared longingly at the empty dishes.

"Oh, Ron, give it a rest!" Hermione snapped when he sighed wistfully.

"I can't 'Mione!" he protested, clutching his abdomen. "I feel like I'm wasting away! I'm a growing boy, and I need to eat!"

"Oh, please, no boy could possibly consume as much as you do."

Ron snorted. "Yeah, well we know Harry's excuse now. He's not exactly like other guys," he pointed out, raising an eyebrow at his friend.

The comment had the affect of turning Hermione's attention away from him as she scrutinized Hallie. The other girl fidgeted nervously under the mothering glare.

"Yes, well, Harry has never eaten enough to satisfy a bird. No wonder you're so small," she tutted.

"Hermione!" Hallie blushed. So what if she didn't eat as much as everyone else? Blame her family. Food was scarce on Privet Drive with Dudley around to feed.

"So, Harry," Ron leaned forward, lowering his voice. "I guess you're wearing the... *you know what?*"

Hallie nodded, trying to ignore the way his eyes searched her for any trace of the necklace. "Dumbledore fixed it yesterday- Ron, give it up, you won't be able to see it."

"Oh," Hermione said in interest, "an invisibility spell? Fascinating! I wonder what kind of charm he used so it wouldn't interfere with the glamour spells...? I've read about this one-"

As Hermione rattled on about spells her less studious friends had never even heard of, Ron rolled his eyes and said, "Mental, that one."

"Do you think I could have a look at it some time?" Hermione asked eagerly.

"Sure, but you'll have to wait until no one's around. Maybe during the summer...?" she left the question hanging. Ron had already mentioned inviting her over for a few weeks, but she was unsure whether the offer still stood.

"Definitely, mate! I just have to talk to my parents, and then I'll send you an owl. You should come too, Hermione-

"It would be nice, but it'll have to wait until I get back from France. My parents have decided to take a trip there, and I can't wait! I've read so many things about Wizarding society there. Did you know they even have a school? It's located somewhere off the coast of-

"There she goes again," Ron muttered. "We have got to keep her away from the library next year."

"Maybe you're right," Hallie agreed, listening to Hermione go on and on. The girl didn't even notice her friends' wandering attention.

"-and then he claimed the palace in the name of France, and turned it into a sanctuary for magical children in the year- Hey! Are you two even listening to a word I've said?" Hermione asked indignantly.

Hallie and Ron froze guiltily, and shared identical looks of panic.

"Um..."

"Another year gone!" The Headmaster's cheerful voice rang out in the hall, saving them. Gradually, the noise in the Great Hall died away, and Dumbledore continued, arms spread wide in his joy, "Now, I'm afraid I must trouble you all with an old man's wheezing waffle before we sink our teeth into our delicious feast-

Ron groaned.

"-What a year it has been! Hopefully, your heads are all a little more full than they were at the start of the term... and you have all of the summer to get them just as empty again!



"Now, as I understand it, the house cup needs awarding, and the points stand thus: In fourth place, Gryffindor, with three hundred and twelve points-

The trio ducked their heads as several members of their house glowered in their direction.

"-in third, Hufflepuff, with three hundred and fifty-two; Ravenclaw had four hundred and twenty-six and Slytherin, four hundred and seventy-two."

The rest of his words were drowned out by a storm of cheering and clapping from the end of the hall. The Slytherins were already congratulating themselves, smirking at the sullen expressions of the other three houses.

Hallie was unfortunate enough to catch Draco Malfoy's eye right as another Slytherin- Zambini or something- nudged him. Seeing her stare, Malfoy joined in with the yelling, even going so far as to bang his goblet against the table. Hallie wanted to take him on right there. It was only Hermione's instinctive actions that forced her wand back into her pocket. She had already removed Ron's, which he soon realized when he reached into his robes. Luckily, no one could hear his cursing, or McGonagall would have surely taken more points.

"Yes, yes, well done, Slytherin," said Dumbledore. "However, recent events must be taken into account."

The entire student body froze. The Slytherins' smiles faded, while the other students grew a little hopeful.

"Ahem, I have a few last-minute points to dish out. Let me see..."

Hallie knew without a doubt that the old man was enjoying this. Everyone, including those up at the staff table, were on the edge of their seats with anticipation.

"First, to Mr. Ronald Weasley... for the best-played game of chess Hogwarts has seen in many years, I award Gryffindor house fifty points."

Ron's jaw dropped. The Gryffindors broke out in cheers, and Ron's ears glowed as the twins thumped him on the back. Percy could be heard boasting down the table, "My brother, you know! My youngest brother! Got past McGonagall's giant chess set!"

Hallie started to wonder just how accurate the rumor mill was. How did they find out about *that*? She wouldn't put it past Dumbledore to say something...

As soon as the table calmed down, the headmaster spoke up, "Second, to Miss Hermione Granger... for the use of cool logic in the face of fire, I award Gryffindor house fifty points."

Hermione's face couldn't be seen past her bushy hair as she hid in her arms. Hallie was pretty sure the emotional bookworm had burst into tears. She edged away slightly, wary of the girl.

"Third, to *Mr.* Harry Potter..." said Dumbledore, his emphasis on the 'Mr.' going unheard by everyone but Hallie, who scowled at him.

The silence in the room was absolute.

"...for pure nerve and outstanding courage, I award Gryffindor house sixty points."

The noise that went up was deafening. Hallie wondered if her ears were bleeding yet from all the screaming. It wasn't only Gryffindor caught up in the excitement. All over, students were muttering. Gryffindor now had four hundred and seventy-two points- a tie with Slytherin. While this was cause for three-quarters of the hall to rejoice, the green and silver table seemed less than enthusiastic. No way were they sharing the House Cup with a bunch of... *Gryffindors*.

*'If only he had given them one less point...'* was Malfoy's private thought.

*'If only he had given us one more point...'* came from Hallie.

Dumbledore raised his hand, and the students hushed.

"There are all kinds of courage," he began, "It takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to our enemies, but just as much to stand up to our friends... I therefore award ten points to Mr. Neville Longbottom."

The Great Hall *exploded*; at least, that's what it felt like to the paintings hung just outside the double doors as they felt a tremor run through the castle walls.

A few third year girls burst out in tears, and a few fourth years boys in laughter. Benches scraped against the floor as people jumped up, cheering and hugging each other. The first year Gryffindors shouted the loudest. Hallie, Ron, and Hermione all stood up clapping. Several students looked toward Neville to shake his hand, but it was little too late. There was some confusion as his housemates searched for the pudgy boy. Oliver Wood finally discovered him passed out on the floor. The poor boy had fainted.

Grinning so hard that her face hurt, Hallie turned away from a whooping Ron to glance at a certain blonde. Malfoy had a look of outrage spread across his features, mirrored by most of his fellow Slytherins. Recalling the feast at the beginning of the year, Hallie waited until he had looked up to twitch her fingers in his directing, still smiling cheekily. His pale face gained twin splotches of an angry red. Hallie tried so hard not stick out her tongue childishly, and Malfoy looked a step away from just flipping her off. It was definitely the highlight of her first year at Hogwarts.

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That night, Hallie collapsed on her bed, exhausted. She had thought the feast would never end! Once the House Cup was awarded, and the food appeared, things had gotten slightly uncomfortable. Hermione had seemed to be bursting with more questions, even though Hallie had explained everything she could in the hospital wing, and Ron just kept staring.

He had actually taken his focus away from dessert to observe her. Hallie had just shrugged off his curiosity as he marveled at how realistic her disguise was. He had begun poking her arm in awe and ruffling her already disastrous hair, keeping in mind what her natural appearance looked like. He was like a muggle seeing magic tricks for

the first time, as he oo-ed and ahh-ed. It was when he finally went just a bit too far that Hallie snapped.

Ron had been searching for her necklace, and was a second away from groping her chest when she had growled warningly, "Touch me, and die." That had cause Hermione to choke on her pumpkin juice, and Parvati and Lavender to stop talking long enough to glance at her with wide eyes. Ron had gotten the hint and went back to his pudding with the air of a kicked puppy.

Hallie jumped when the dormitory door burst open, and the boys entered, still talking loudly about Gryffindor's triumph, and the riot that had nearly broken out at the Slytherin table. They were all protesting Dumbledore's favoritism, which was rather hypocritical of them, considering Snape gave them most of their own points, while taking away everyone else's.

"Did you see the look on Snape's face?"

"Like he had swallowed stinksap! He was sending McGonagall death glares all through dinner-"

"Yeah, well, she seemed right smug-"

Seamus and Dean guffawed as they dumped a weak-kneed Neville on his bed. The shy boy had woken up within ten minutes of fainting, only to be told that, no, it wasn't a dream, and he'd actually won points for Gryffindor. Neville was still recovering from his shock.

Ron came into the dormitory last, just in time to hear Dean's comment, and he added, "Yeah, it must have killed her to see Snape take the House Cup every year. She must be pretty relieved to have it back in her office. Think she'll go easy on us now?"

Seamus snorted as he walked over to his trunk, "Doubt it."

"Yeah, but Snape'll probably get worse!" Dean complained, and began to pull off his robes to change into a t-shirt.

Neville just shuddered from his bed. It was widely known how much he feared the Potions Master.

The boys began to change into their pajamas, although Hallie decided to wait ten minutes before she went into the bathroom to do so... at least until the room had stopped spinning. Throwing an arm over her eyes, Hallie sighed. She still wasn't completely healed, as Madam Pomfrey had tried to tell her.

Ron moved to undo his belt before he suddenly froze, his face flaming.

"Hey, what's up, mate?" Seamus asked, seeing the boy's hesitation.

"Er-" Ron's eyes flicked toward Hallie still lying on the bed. The disguised girl lifted her forearm from her face long enough to watch him stutter as he scrambled for an explanation. She snickered lightly at his expense. "I think I'm just gonna go change in the bathroom!" he finally squeaked.

The others laughed as he dodged into the side door. Seamus called after him, "Don't tell us you're getting shy now, Ron! Harry's bad enough!"

Hallie buried her face in a pillow as the others laughed. She almost felt bad for Ron. If he kept up like that, they would never let him live it down. They were used to her changing in private, figuring she was just embarrassed. Dean and Seamus had teased her about it at first, but gave up when Hallie said it was only to save her from seeing them naked. She valued her eyesight very much.

*'Poor Ron...'*

Hallie's sympathy didn't last long when she saw the red-head poke his head out of the bathroom, and clear his throat awkwardly.

"Um, Neville, could you- I forgot my-"

"Oh!" Neville rolled out of bed in realization, and grabbed some clothes from Ron's trunk, passing them to him while the other two boys fell over laughing.

"Thanks!" Ron vanished back into the bathroom.

Hallie grinned and shook her head at her friend. She knew Ron was going to have a hard time accepting that she wasn't really a boy, but while things would be awkward at first, they were still best friends. Hopefully, he would get over it soon, as it didn't seem like Hallie would be a girl again any time in the near future.

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In all the commotion with the Sorcerer's Stone, final exams had seemed like the last thing Hallie needed to worry about. After all, as she had told Ron at breakfast, stopping a Dark Lord had top priority over passing first year classes any day. Just after the words had left her mouth, their resident know-it-all ran over with their test scores in hand. Hallie considered herself lucky the other girl hadn't heard anything. She sometimes thought Hermione had a sixth sense when it came to homework and rules.

Once the letter was in her hand, Hallie worried at her lip and debated not opening it at all, just saying that she did. Maybe she would be better off not knowing her grades... As they say, ignorance is bliss. Ron seemed to be of the same mind as he tried to hide the envelope under his porridge bowl. Hermione finally forced them to compromise, and open their results together on three. Hallie had nodded jerkily, while Ron gulped. Hermione had taken a calming breath with her fingers poised to tear.

1... 2... 3...

By some miracle, all three passed. Hallie had no idea how it was possible, and Ron swore they must have gotten the wrong Mr. Weasley. Hermione had shaken her head and pointed out the initial letter 'R' before his name. Ron argued, saying it looked more like a 'P.'

Either way, they had all passed fairly well for people too preoccupied with imminent danger to study, although Hermione had still managed to get in a couple hours of 'light reading' before they went down the trapdoor.

It was to no one's surprise when she came out with the highest marks in their year... and still begged for a retake. Hallie had done pretty good herself, although, personally, she didn't count Potions or History

of Magic. Snape was sure to have marked her test before even looking at it, and most students knew that Binns was forced to grade on a curve. Ron's scores hadn't been half bad. They were nowhere near good enough by Percy's standards, but they were enough to keep the twins from dieing of shame. Even clumsy Neville had passed, although his talent in Herbology was what really did it. As for the other houses, Draco Malfoy could be seen strutting around the school even more than usual thanks to coming in second in their year; but what he didn't know was that Hallie had seen him sulking on occasion, and she was sure it was due to a Muggleborn beating him. Crabbe and Goyle, unfortunately, weren't going to be kicked out of school for their stupidity, but as Ron had said, there was always next year.

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It was time to go... as Hermione was repeating every five minutes, shouting up the boys' staircase for her best friend to hurry. The train was going to leave in fifteen minutes, and packing his things seemed to have completely slipped Ron's mind. It was kind of sad actually, seeing as summer vacation was all he had been able to talk about lately.

"RONALD WEASLEY!"

From beside the enraged girl, Hallie winced, covering her ears.

"IF YOU AREN'T DOWN HERE IN TWO MINUTES, WE ARE GOING TO LEAVE YOU TO *WALK BACK TO ENGLAND!*"

Exactly one minute and thirty-six seconds later, Ron dashed down the stairs, nearly tripping over his own feet as he dragged the heavy trunk, and tucked a squirming Scabbers down his shirt pocket. Hermione had already turned and walked out of the portrait hole, her belongings secured on the train ahead of time.

"OY!" Ron shouted, puffing as he caught up with them. "You said I had two minutes! I still have twenty-four seconds!"

Hallie raised an eyebrow in disbelief, "You were actually counting?"

"Um, no..." he protested weakly.

Hallie snorted, and waved her wand to make both their trunks levitate. Hermione was right when she said they had to hurry... even if Hallie wasn't exactly eager to go back to Surrey. Behind her trotted Sable, long forked tail held aloof in the air. The cat had refused to even acknowledge Hallie since her first morning back from the Hospital Wing. He seemed to blame her for leaving him behind, and nearly getting herself killed. It probably didn't help that he'd had to scrounge up his own food for the three days she was unconscious. At least Sable and Hedwig seemed to have come to some kind of agreement. The owl had been bringing him dead rats each night, and Sable had stopped trying to pounce on her for entertainment.

They made it down to the boarding platform with only five minutes to spare. The Hogwarts Express chugged impatiently as the students pulled in any last-minute belongs, including the elusive Trevor, and slammed their compartment doors shut all along the train.

Hallie was delayed slightly by the appearance of Hagrid when he gave her a gift he had been putting together. She had only glanced inside the leather photo album, but what she had seen was enough to make her eyes tear up as she thanked the man profusely. She silently made a promise to herself to look at the pictures as soon as she had a moment alone. Maybe, if she was lucky, the Dursleys would ignore her for an hour or two. She'd need to smuggle a flashlight, though... the cupboard under the stairs was awfully dark.

Waving farewell, Hallie climbed into one of the compartments near the back of the train, and Ron shut the door after her. Unlike at the beginning of the year, no student limbs hung outside of the windows to say good-bye as they pulled out of Hogsmeade Station. Very few of them would actually miss their teachers, least of all Snape after he had sprung summer homework on them. Hermione would have been the only one waving tearfully if McGonagall hadn't already gone back to the castle with Dumbledore.

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The trip back Kings Cross seemed to take no time at all. They were already speeding through familiar countryside when Hallie felt it had only been about fifteen minutes. To pass the time, the trio made meaningless small talk, mostly about their upcoming vacations.



Hermione reminded them of her trip to France, and Ron mentioned that he would just be lazing about at home (Hermione was scandalized at the very thought) and playing Quidditch in the field behind his house. Hallie was dead serious when she told her friends that she expected her summer to be incredibly monotonous, if not highly unpleasant. She begged Ron to get her out of there as soon as possible, even if he had to kidnap her in the middle of the night to do it.

At one point, the witch pushing the food trolley arrived, and Hallie treated them all to Pumpkin Pasties. Hermione tried to protest, she wasn't one for sweets with her parents being dentists, but Ron said he would eagerly take it instead. Hermione grumbled something about him being a pig as she handed over her cake.

When they ran out of things to discuss, Ron tried to tempt Hallie into a game of chess. He had apparently gotten over his issues with the giant chess set. He claimed it wasn't so bad when the Queen was so small, and Ron now took a vindictive pleasure in decimating her fragile body while he played black.

Unfortunately, for him, Hallie had to decline. "Ron, just because I'm a girl doesn't mean I've gotten any better at that blasted game. Why do you even bother challenging me when you always win?"

"Well," Ron shrugged sheepishly, "that's the best part."

Hermione sniffed from behind her latest book.

After that, Hallie decided to go in search of the nearest bathroom and excused herself. She finally located the small side door, and stepped in, not realizing the door hadn't shut completely. She took care of her business quickly, not deeming it safe to leave her best friends alone for too long. The lull in their fights had only come with their worry for her, but now that she was better, they were bound to start up again soon.

As Hallie washed her hands in the sink, she had the urge to glance up in the mirror. She studied her reflection, bringing a hand up to her necklace uncertainly. Should she...? What if someone saw...? Her indecision only lasted a moment before Hallie impatiently tugged the

chain over her neck. It became visible in her hands, and Hallie felt a tingle run through her as she she looked up.

A sigh of relief escaped her at the sight of the emerald-eyes girl in the mirror. It had only been a few days since the charms were down, but she hadn't had the chance to really check herself then. Now her eyes ran wonderingly over the small nose and smiling lips. She drank the sight in, not even able to wait until she returned to Privet Drive.

It was strange, but she looked different than she remembered. Her hair had grown a little more past her shoulders, but that wasn't it. Maybe it was the look in her eyes... The girl who hadn't known about magic or Hogwarts had always held a despairing expression on her face, resigned to a life with people who hated her. However, even with that sadness, there had been an innocence to her. Now Hallie's eyes held more knowledge. They knew what it was like to have real friends. They also knew what it was like to have enemies, and an evil creature who would stop at nothing to kill her, no matter what it took...

Hallie jumped, startled, when the bathroom door swung inward without the slightest resistance. Still caught up in thoughts of her own demise, for a moment, Hallie had the irrational thought that it was the Dark Lord come to kill her. When she caught her first glimpse of the intruder who had yet to notice her, she knew it was so much worse than old Voldy.

There was a flash of white-blond hair, and Hallie had only a second's thought to choose a course of action. After all, here she was, the Boy-Who-Lived, dressed in Harry Potter's ratty old clothing, and gaping with the face of a young girl. Malfoy would be suspicious if he had enough time to really examine her. There just weren't that many girls in their year, and Hallie didn't look a thing like any of them.

*'Oh, and let's not forget the bloody bullseye in the middle of my head! How many people can claim to have one of those?'*

Just then, Malfoy's blue eyes flickered toward her, and he froze in surprise, his mind still adjusting to the fact that he had walked in on a girl. Hallie took advantage of his shock, and did the last thing she wanted to do at a time like this.

Squealing in true female fashion, Hallie shrieked and shoved Malfoy back into the hall. "EEEEEEEEK! GET OUT, YOU PERVERT!"

The door slammed shut in his stunned face, the sound echoing in the corridor, along with Hallie's previous yells. Malfoy remained on the floor where he had fallen, eyes wide and uncomprehending. As his brain finally caught up with him, Malfoy's face flushed brightly, and he muttered a pointless insult before hurrying back to his compartment, trying futilely to force away any trace of his embarrassment.

Back inside the bathroom, Hallie slid to the tiled floor as she leaned against the door. Her face was burning with mortification at what she had needed to do. Groaning quietly, Hallie pulled on the necklace that had lain forgotten on the edge of the sink.

"That was way too close..."

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By the time they arrived at Platform 9 3/4, Hallie was almost eager to get away from her two friends, if only for her piece of mind. She had informed them both of her near confrontation in the bathroom, and their reactions weren't completely unexpected. Ron hadn't stopped howling with mirth, a real feat since he'd had almost half an hour to get it out of his system, and Hermione hadn't stopped scolding her. The girl was furious at Hallie's recklessness, explaining in great detail exactly why Draco Malfoy was the last person they needed to find out Hallie's secret after all the trouble she and the Headmaster had gone through to keep it. Hallie agreed wholeheartedly; Malfoy would blurt out her secret to everyone from his housemates to the Minister of Magic. However, just because she understood Hermione's ire, didn't mean she enjoyed getting her own stupidity rubbed in her face... repeatedly.

"Aww, c'mon, 'Mione! Give her- er, *him* a break!" Ron said, finally coming to his senses. "It's not like Malfoy even saw anything, so you don't need to give Harry such a hard time!"

"Well, excuse me for being worried, Ron," Hermione said acidly, "but Harry needs to learn to be more cautious!"

"Why the hell should she? It's not like that git can do anything even if he does find out she's a-"

"Ron!" Hallie hissed warningly as they waited in the queue to pass through the barrier. People were beginning to stare. It didn't help that Hallie kept receiving random shouts of farewell, regardless of whether she could remember ever meeting each person. One girl kept winking and blowing kisses before her mothers dragged her off the platform.

"See what you've nearly done!" Hermione scowled, dropping her luggage and placing her hands on her hips.

"Well, *sorry!*" Ron replied hotly. "It's not like I meant to-"

"Yes, well you should be more careful, too!"

"Who died and put you in charge?" Ron asked sarcastically.

"Uh, guys?" Hallie butt in, but they ignored her.

*'Figures,'* Hallie shook her head in frustration. *'I knew the peace couldn't last. Couldn't they have at least waited until next September?'*

"Well, someone has to be! It's not like you can be trusted with the position!"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"*Guys-*"

"You know exactly what it means! You never think before you open your mouth-"

"I do too!"

"One of these days-"

"GUYS!" Hallie shouted, fed up.

"WHAT?" They both turned to her, expressions frozen in annoyance.

"Are you done yet? We're holding up the line," she gestured to the growing mass of families waiting to cross the barrier. Most of them had their eyes trained on the Boy-Who-Lived, while a select few were too enthralled with the bickering children.

"Oh, dear..."

"Oops..."

Hallie rolled her eyes at the pair, before grabbing both by the arm and hauling them through the brick wall. She kept her head down to avoid catching any more eyes, and didn't release them until they were past the muggle ticket booths. She finally let them go when she heard a woman's voice calling after Ron. Hallie blushed when noticed the gaggle of red heads pursuing them. Right behind them were a brunette couple, looking slightly uncomfortable around the eccentric family.

Hermione smiled brilliantly and ran over to greet her parents. Ron, on the other hand, tried to hide behind Hallie.

Mrs. Weasley finally stood in front of her, watching with hidden amusement as Hallie tried to pull Ron back in front. The plump woman smiled at Hallie and said, "Hello, you must be Harry. We've heard all about you from the twins. Ronald-" she speared the boy with a glare "-however, doesn't bother to write to his poor mother! Instead, I have to hear about you fighting trolls and You-Know-Who from Professor McGonagall! Have I taught you nothing-"

"Aww, mum..." Ron groaned quietly as the woman continued.

"Could have gotten yourself killed... Wandering the school at night..."

"I guess I'll see you later, mate," Hallie tried not to laugh at him as she picked up her trolley and Sable's carrier.

Seeing Hallie turn to go, Hermione quickly excused herself from her parents. "Hold on, Harry! I'll walk you to your car! I'll be right back mum, dad!"

"Hermione, what-" Hallie was confused when the girl grabbed her under the arm and started tugging her towards the parking lot.

"Wait for me!" Ron ducked out of his mother's grip. "I'll come, too!"

From behind him, the twins snickered. Mrs. Weasley let him go reluctantly. She seemed to agree that Hallie shouldn't be left by herself.

Ron grabbed Hallie's things, and followed Hermione's lead. Rather than head toward the parking lot, she first dragged them behind a pillar.

"Hallie, hurry up and take off the amulet!" she hissed, checking over her shoulder for anyone watching.

"Oh, yeah!" Hallie nearly smacked herself. How could she forget?

She yanked it over head while Ron stood watch, and shoved it into an oversized pocket. When Ron was sure there were enough people blocking them from his mother's sight, the trio ran outside the station, wanting to get out of there as soon as possible. It wouldn't do for another Hogwarts student to catch Harry Potter's best friends with some strange girl.

Hallie finally spotted her uncle's company car parked on the curb. Petunia and Dudley were there as well, Petunia tapping her foot impatiently, while Dudley hadn't even bothered to get out of the car. The Durselys had looked irritated just standing there, but when Hallie appeared, they seemed even more uneasy. It was obvious to Hallie that they were hoping to get home before anyone saw them and connected their perfect family with a scrawny delinquent.

Following Hallie's gaze toward the threesome, both Hermione and Ron blanched.

"Are those your- er, family?" Hermione asked, sounding awkward.

"Unfortunately," Hallie replied, her stomach sinking with every step closer to them.

"Good luck, mate," Ron said honestly.

Just then, something very good occurred to Hallie. Forget luck, she wouldn't need it!

Catching the grin blooming on her face, Ron looked confused, "What are you so happy about?"

"Oh, nothing... I just think this summer might actually be looking up."

Ron glanced back at the large, purplish man who glowered frightening at his best friend. "How do you reckon that?"

"Your relatives do seem rather unpleasant." Hermione grimaced when Dudley's piggy eyes landed on Hallie and narrowed menacingly. "They don't look the least bit happy to see you."

*'Understatement of the century,'* Hallie thought wryly.

"Yeah, more of a cross between furious and horrified." Ron added the last after seeing Petunia's pinched face pale. He realized why when Hallie started twirling her wand in plain sight.

"Exactly," Hallie said, feeling smug as the rest of her family noticed her 'little friend.'

Her friends exchanged glances over her head, as though worried for her sanity. Seeing this, Hallie added, "They can rant and rave all they like, but they won't dare come near me with this." Hallie flipped her wand over in the air, before catching it and tucking it through her belt loop. She smirked as Dudley ducked down under the car window.

"Har- Hallie! You know we can't use-" Hermione hissed furiously until Hallie slapped a hand over her mouth.

"Shh! Listen, 'Mione, I know that, and you know that... but they don't, and I intend to keep it that way!"

Hallie winked as they both caught on, and tipped her trunk off the trolley. Lifting up Sable's carrier, Hallie was glad she had let Hedwig

fly home. Even with the threat of magic, she knew the Dursleys would not appreciate her new pets.

Waving good-bye to her friends, Hallie dumped her things in the trunk, ignoring the way her uncle loomed over her impatiently. She then hopped in the back, loving the way Dudley cowered and tried to put as much space between them as possible. It wasn't easy as he took up at least two-thirds of the seat. Petunia opened her mouth to complain when she saw Hallie place Sable in her lap. She quickly shut her mouth, though, when Sable's innocent appearance was banished by his flashing red eyes. How could Hallie have ever found that talent annoying? It was bloody brilliant!

As the car pulled into the midday traffic, Hallie leaned back in her seat and relaxed. For the first time she could remember, she was actually eager to get back to Privet Drive.

*'This summer is going to be so much fun,'* Hallie thought wickedly.

Just then, the wand at her side sparked, causing Vernon to jerk the wheel, Petunia to shriek, and Dudley to whimper.

*'Definitely.'*

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## **REVIEW IF YOU WANT TO SEE THE SEQUEL!**

**Seriously, I want to know what you guys thought of this chapter. I meant to get it out before Monday, but I'm having some beta trouble. She's vanished. So, any takers for the temporary position? I'm already thinking of someone, but I have to ask them.**

**Anyway, I hope you guys liked this. It came out longer than I thought it would, like my chapters usually do, because I added in a little more humor. How many of you liked that thing with Malfoy in the bathroom? I came up with that at the last minute. I hope the end was okay too. I didn't want to leave you hanging, but I also didn't want it to just keep going on and on...**



**I'm so happy I finished this! I get to start the sequel now, and I already know what I'm going to do! If you have any ideas of what you want to see, though, I'm open to suggestions. Oh, and here's the next title, just to get you excited:**

**"Hallie Potter: Secrets Revealed"**